“THE DYNAMIC SIDE OF LIFE” – THE EMERGENCE OF MARY COFFIN WARE DENNETT AS A RADICAL SEX EDUCATOR

BY LYNN LEDERER

A dissertation submitted to

The Graduate School of Education

Rutgers-The State University of New Jersey,

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree

Doctor of Education

Social and Philosophical Foundations

In Education

__________________________________
Catherine A. Lugg, Ph.D. Chair

__________________________________
James M. Giarelli, Ph.D.

__________________________________
Carol F. Karpinski, Ed.D.

New Brunswick, New Jersey
ABSTRACT

In 1915, Mary Ware Dennett wrote a significant yet little known sex education manual for her two sons entitled *The Sex Side of Life, an Explanation for Young People.* In it, she defied convention by expressing her radical views about sexuality, first to her own two sons and later to the public. Dennett offered forthright and specific information about the physiological, scientific, moral and emotional aspects of sexuality at a time when sex education and sex educators, if they existed at all, typically attempted to repress or control sexuality, and education about it, rather than to inform.¹ Many people considered Dennett’s book radical because she challenged prevailing Victorian attitudes about sexuality, women and the transfer of culture. Additionally, she dared to express the view that sex was not just for procreation but was pleasurable.

Dennett’s manual for her sons was copied and passed along to her son’s friends and to the children of her friends and colleagues. It was published in *The Medical Review of Reviews* in 1918 and thousands of copies were distributed to institutions and individuals worldwide before she was arrested for sending obscenity through the mail in 1929. Fourteen years after publication, her arrest became a cause célèbre.

Through narrative inquiry, the study researched Dennett’s transition from the private to the public side of life by looking at her cultural and intellectual heritage, personal life and the historical context of industrial capitalism. Dennett’s unequivocal conviction that all members of a truly democratic society have the right to *know* was quite radical in its time. It is still radical today because implicit in that outlook is the

belief that with knowledge, ordinary people have the ability and the responsibility to chart their own course in life without control from those on top of the social hierarchy. Freire said, “A real humanist can be identified more by his trust in people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without that trust.” Dennett was a true humanist, trusting in the ability of ordinary people.²

Nearly a century after publication, the lessons that surfaced from Dennett’s transition from the private to the public side of life are still valid. The ability to actively engage with the world is critical for empowerment and active engagement can only occur with complete access to knowledge and information. Sexuality is part of the knowledge and comprehensive information that is necessary to experience The Dynamic Side of Life

---

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Because of Dr. David Muschinski, I became interested in archival research and
historiography, and because he challenged me to find an early twentieth century birth
control advocate who was not involved in Eugenics, I found Mary Ware Dennett. This
dissertation is dedicated to him with all my thanks.

Nine years ago, Dr. James Giarelli put the idea into my head of studying for a
doctorate by asking if I had ever considered it. Thank you, Jim. It has been a wonderful and
transforming experience. To my committee chair Dr. Catherine Lugg I owe special thanks
for getting me through this process with her gentle prodding and guidance and to Dr. Carol
Karpinski, thank you for your enthusiasm and for serving on my committee.

To my mother who talked me out of leaving school when I was an undergraduate,
and to my 91 year old father who told me to “hurry up” so that he could attend my
graduation, thank you for helping me get to this place. To my dearest husband Peter, thank
you for your on-going support and confidence in me, and to my loving son Ira, thank you
for your tolerance of my nine-year distraction, your encouragement and for your humor.

To Mary Hull, the other Mary in my life, special thanks for your friendship and
intellectual support at our Sunday morning writer’s group, and to Dr. Daniel Goldberg, thank
you for sharing your wisdom with me and for the multigenerational family system. Thanks go
to Middlesex County College for supporting my education, to Marita Boes and Susan Levine
for their friendship, encouragement, support and technical assistance, and to Susie Wilson
who taught me that sex education is a legitimate field of inquiry. Thank you Vicki Wilson for
50 years of friendship, love and understanding and for showing me the value of reflection and
intellectual investigation. This dissertation builds on research conducted by Dr. Constance M.
Chen. Many, many thanks go to Dr. Chen.
# CONTENTS

## Chapter I: Introduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Literature</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennett Overlooked</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennett Mentioned</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennett Recognized</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Sex Education</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Framework</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter II: Forebears, Family and First Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family System Theory</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forebears</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old England</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New England</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boscawen New Hampshire</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffin Abolitionists</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffins of Note</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Puritan Influence</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate Family</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Years</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core Coffin Belief System</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pioneering Spirit</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortitude and Responsibility</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frugality and Generosity</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Diffusion of Knowledge</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter III: Arts and Crafts and Dennett’s Emergence as a Reformer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Arts and Crafts Movement</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennett and The Arts and Crafts Movement</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art and Ethics: Education, Democracy and Individual Freedom</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter IV: The Personal is Political

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtship</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting Married</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Beginning of the End</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandal</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ILLUSTRATIONS, PHOTOGRAPHS, CHARTS AND TABLES

Illustrations
1: ASHA Poster-Self Control ................................................................. 23
2: White Cross Pledge .............................................................................. 25
3: Suffrage Parade, DC, 1913 ................................................................. 134
4: Women’s Suffrage Organization .......................................................... 148
5: NAWSA Calendar .................................................................................. 182
8. Madame Restell ..................................................................................... 204

Photographs
1. Lucia Ames Mead .................................................................................... 61
2. Dennett at Twelve ................................................................................... 71
3. Dennett ca 1889-1893 ............................................................................ 87
4. Dennett 1896 ......................................................................................... 96
5. Dennett, 1910 ....................................................................................... 129
6. Dennett Campaigning for Suffrage ......................................................... 141
7. Dennett I New York .............................................................................. 157
9. Devon, Mary and Carleton Dennett, 1919 ............................................. 213
10. Dennett after Trial ............................................................................. 230

Charts
1. Lockouts and Strikes ........................................................................... 109
2. Women Attending College ..................................................................... 139
3. Birth Rate Decline ................................................................................ 192

Tables
1. Divorce Rates ..................................................................................... 130
“THE DYNAMIC SIDE OF LIFE” – THE EMERGENCE OF MARY COFFIN WARE DENNETT AS A RADICAL SEX EDUCATOR

Sex education is not a thing apart from other education, and education is not a thing apart from life. Living is education, and it will be a good education if we allow it to be so, and if we will make it so ourselves. If this little volume has helped any parents to realize more fully their creative and recreative powers, I shall be glad.¹

Mary Ware Dennett, 1931

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Mary Ware Dennett (1872-1947) wrote a significant yet little known 23-page sex education manual entitled The Sex Side of Life, an Explanation for Young People. In it, she defied convention by expressing her radical views about sexuality, first to her own two sons and later to the public. Dennett offered forthright and specific information about the physiological, scientific, moral and emotional aspects of sexuality at a time when sex education and sex educators, if they existed at all, typically attempted to repress sexuality, and education about it, rather than to inform.² Many people considered the book radical because Dennett challenged prevailing Victorian attitudes about sexuality, women and the transfer of culture. Additionally, she dared to express the view that sex was not just for procreation but was pleasurable.

Dennett wrote to her son Carleton just before writing The Sex Side of Life and said, “Sex is the very greatest physical and emotional pleasure there is in the world.”³

---

¹ This is a closing statement in Dennett’s book about sex education. She wrote it “for average parents . . . who are busy meeting the exigencies of ordinary life, and who are puzzled and anxious about their children in relation to sex.” Mary Ware Dennett, The Sex Education of Children (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1931), 141.


³ Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to son, Carleton" (MWD Papers, Reel 1, January 10, 1915).
She articulated that view in the engaging guide she wrote for her 14-year old son in 1915. *The Sex Side of Life* supported her belief in the self-discipline that came from understanding rather than from fear. Dennett defended her comprehensive approach to sex education in the *Introduction for Elders* at the opening of the book. She said that only comprehensive and accurate information about sexuality can be depended upon to help children develop the self-control that is based on “knowledge, not fear, the reverence that will prevent premature or trivial connections, the good taste and finesse that will make their sex life, when they reach maturity, a vitalizing success.”

Dennett’s belief in the importance of knowledge and an informed citizenry is a theme that she expressed throughout her life both in her relationships with her family and friends and in her extensive reform work. In her role as founder, leader and activist in many of the central reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Dennett demonstrated her commitment to the diffusion of knowledge for all. She viewed the right to *know* as an essential democratic right that supported individual freedom, responsibility and personal fulfillment.

Dennett believed in the inextricable connection between education, family, community and life itself, that is, the essence of life was about growth – adapting, changing and reorganizing to the evolving nature of one’s environment. She once sent a book to her Aunt Lucia Ames Mead that expressed her views about the connection between living and education. Dennett described the book as “a plea for the *dynamic* instead of the static side of life. …It is along the line of my general thinking against

---

4 Mary Ware Dennett, *The Sex Side of Life, an Explanation for Young People*, first written in 1915. (The author, 1918), 4.
anything and everything that tends to institutionalize one’s mind.” Dennett thought a closed mind was counterintuitive to the goals of education, morality and religion because learning and developing was not possible without being open to possibilities. A static mind had no life because living was about questioning, wondering, and exploring. It is clear that Dennett lived her life in the dynamic fashion she described to her aunt. She filled it with social action that was informed by her constantly evolving and developing political philosophy.

Dennett’s belief in the importance of education and personal freedom surfaced early in her reform work. For example, in her work with the Arts and Crafts movement she focused on the economic and educational considerations of labor over purely aesthetic issues. Additionally, she worked for the unrestricted availability of contraceptive devices and information in her birth control advocacy effort. Dennett was not alone in her respect for knowledge and information. Others reinforced her approach.

John Dewey, exemplar of the progressive approach to education, thought political tyranny, repression, illness and poverty were “sure to pass away with the

---

5 Underlining is from the original.

6 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Aunt Lucia Ames Mead" (MWD Papers, Reel 1, n.d.). It appears that Dennett was influenced by Dewey’s views on education. They had a personal connection as well. Dewey led Dennett’s defense committee. The New York Times, "Asks Aid For Mrs. Dennett," November 14, 1929. Additionally, Dennett’s papers include correspondence between them. Dennett’s belief in education as a dynamic process that is connected to family and community mirrors Dewey’s philosophy about education as association. Dewey stated, “The problem is to unify, to organize education, to bring all its various factors together, through putting it as a whole into organic union with everyday life.” The organic union Dewey suggested includes connecting the individual to society, ideas to action, thoughts to feelings and a democratic public school system with a democratic society - concepts that seem to guide Dennett’s life work. John Dewey, The School and Society and the Child and the Curriculum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1900), 92, 6, 7.

7 Mary Ware Dennett, “Aesthetics and Ethics,” Handicraft, May, 1902.
growth of science, and with economic and political freedom." Dennett shared Dewey’s faith in secular science and democracy as a means to combat ignorance. She relied on science to legitimize the flow of knowledge to the community. Dennett said accurate and scientific information should be available to everyone because it was valuable to both the individual as well as to society. She stated, “All laws which hamper the free and responsible diffusion of this knowledge among the people, are in the highest degree pernicious and opposed to the best and most permanent interest of the society.” Dennett had a fundamental confidence in the power of personal agency when individuals received accurate and scientifically sound information. She extolled the subsequent satisfaction of making personal decisions based on *creative adjustment* rather than *passive acceptance*.

A detailed narrative of Mary Ware Dennett has yet to be fully told. Even though Dennett, along with Jessie Ashley and Clara Gruening Stillman, is credited with founding the first American birth control organization (The National Birth Control League) in 1915, many scholars have been reluctant to view her contributions to the movement as worthwhile. Dennett is often ignored or cast as an insignificant player in birth control and sex education history. She is usually recognized as contributing only

---


10 Mary Ware Dennett, *The Sex Education of Children* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1931), 71.

isolated theories and strategies that were irrelevant and ultimately discarded.\textsuperscript{12} Her numerous contributions to other progressive reform organizations are even less well known.

**The Literature**

Only a few scholars have examined Dennett’s life, partly because her historical significance and popular appeal are diminished by the unavoidable comparison to her larger than life contemporary Margaret Sanger. Both Sanger and Dennett were widely known in the early part of the twentieth century for their work in the birth control movement, yet Dennett has been nearly forgotten. Most historians treat Dennett as little more than a footnote. They neglect to examine the source of the tension between her and Sanger, thereby missing an opportunity to explicate the complexity of the birth control and sex education culture of the early twentieth century. The following literature review contains an analysis of the most relevant material that overlooked, mentioned or included Dennett’s contributions to two of the most fundamental reforms of the early twentieth century.

Sanger claimed she alone was responsible for rescuing “her fellow citizens from contraceptive ignorance,” a myth that has been perpetuated by others and thereby contributes to the absence of information about Mary Ware Dennett and the need for additional research.\textsuperscript{13} Andrea Tone’s article on black market birth control suggests that


\textsuperscript{13} Along with Tone, Brodie refers to Sanger’s “search” for birth control as an exaggeration, but unlike Tone he supports the traditional historical view that Sanger saved the world from birth control ignorance. James
Sanger overstated the dearth of information about birth control, an exaggeration that surely reinforces the myth of Sanger as the only noteworthy leader in the field. The consensus is that Margaret Sanger was the most significant birth control activist in the United States during the early 1900s. With her magnetic personality, flamboyant lifestyle and acts of civil disobedience, she attracted widespread public attention and support for the birth control movement. While Margaret Sanger was undoubtedly the most effective and well known of the early birth control advocates, others including Dennett played an important role in the conversation.

**Dennett Overlooked**

The list of historians and feminists who omitted any mention of Dennett in their publications is long. For example, James Brodie failed to make a single reference to her in either of his books about reproductive freedom.\(^\text{14}\) Nor did he reference either of the two birth control organizations she founded, the National Birth Control League or the Voluntary Parenthood League. Johanna Schoen and Nicola Beisel did not refer to Dennett either, in their otherwise well-researched books on birth control history.\(^\text{15}\)

Some omissions are surprising. For example, Tone criticized Sanger’s disingenuous self-promotion, her support of negative eugenics and the forced sterilization of the incarcerated. Nevertheless, she labeled Sanger as the “twentieth century’s greatest

---


champion of birth control,” without a single mention of Dennett in the body of the text.16 Tone cited two of Dennett’s books, *Who’s Obscene* and *Birth Control Laws, Shall We Keep Them, Change Them Or Abolish Them?*, and an article she wrote on birth control for *Harpers Weekly* without acknowledging Dennett’s central role in the movement. Tone is not alone in her failure to recognize Dennett’s secondary, yet significant, place in birth control history.

After questioning Ellen Chesler at her Princeton University lecture about why Dennett is almost forgotten, she replied that history tends to forget the second tier, the second most important and the second most significant. “That’s just how it is,” she concluded. Her view that only Sanger’s contributions were noteworthy appears in the biography she wrote about Sanger.17

**Dennett Mentioned**

Chesler used the term “Boston Brahmin” as a pejorative to describe Dennett. It is true that Dennett came from a well-established New England family, but her life was filled with a series of financial insecurities that caused her to struggle financially for most of her life.18 Characterizing Sanger and Dennett as polar opposites, Sanger as Irish working class and Dennett as belonging to the Boston elite, obscures the very real

---


17 In November of 2008, Ellen Chesler, biographer and director of the Eleanor Roosevelt Initiative on Women and Public Policy at Roosevelt House at Hunter College of the City University of New York gave a lecture at Princeton University. Titled, "Reconsidering Margaret Sanger: A Biographer's Perspective 15 Years after Publication," Chesler recapped much of the previous research that she included in *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America*. In a conversation before and after the lecture, Chesler dismissed my interest and fascination with Dennett as irrelevant. To Chesler, only one voice, that of Margaret Sanger, deserved consideration.

differences between their politics and strategies – differences that could help us to understand similar contemporary issues, such as those related to public school sex education programs. Their differences went well beyond class. In a more recent treatment of Dennett, Rosen described the same aspect of her background more accurately by saying Dennett came from a “respectable, entrenched New England family.”

D’Emilio and Freedman mention Dennett exactly once in their comprehensive and highly acclaimed book and Carole McCann dismissed Dennett’s contributions with ease. Justifying her focus on Sanger, McCann said that although she is certainly not claiming that Sanger was the only birth control advocate, she treats Sanger as the central figure of the movement. She did, however briefly mention that Dennett led the Voluntary Parenthood League’s drive to repeal federal laws barring the distribution of contraceptives, and that Eleanor Jones led the American Birth Control League (ABCL) from 1928-1935.

McCann is guilty of using at least one flawed secondary source – by Lasch – an article in *Notable American Women, A Biographical Dictionary*. In it, Lasch mistakenly credited Sanger for organizing the National Birth Control League in 1914 instead of 1916.

---


Dennett, Ashley, and Gruening Stillman in 1915. He stated that Dennett merged the NBCL with the Voluntary Parenthood League (VPL) in 1918. Instead, Dennett formed the VPL, a completely new organization with a new mission, to focus exclusively on repealing federal obscenity laws. Despite the misinformation contained in his brief biography of Dennett in *Notable American Women*, Lasch captured much of the depth and breadth of Dennett’s reform work.

In spite of citing an incorrect source, (Lasch) McCann did a thorough job of explaining the most significant differences between the open bill favored by Dennett and the doctors-only bill favored by Sanger. Additionally, McCann presented a comprehensive analysis of the principles informing Dennett’s philosophy on birth control. McCann summarized Dennett’s position by saying she “argued that an open market of knowledge was the only democratic market of knowledge.”

Linda Gordon did not acknowledge Dennett, Ashley or Stillman as founders of the NBCL or recognize its significance as the first American birth control organization. Instead, she characterized the founders as a group of New York City liberals that “would not support Sanger or any law defying tactics.” Dennett’s strategy to legalize birth control was to disassociate it from the salacious erotica or obscenity that flourished in the early twentieth century. She believed birth control was not obscene and should be separated from any legal definition of obscenity. In doing so, parents could decide when and if to have children. Although Gordon credited the NBCL for sponsoring a more comprehensive reform than Sanger’s ABCL that worked to make birth control available through doctors only, she chided the NBCL for focusing exclusively on legislation. According to Gordon, Dennett’s emphasis on the civil liberty aspects of birth control
drew support from liberals, but left her outside “the most important currents in social thought.” In another section, Gordon labels Dennett a “right-wing socialist.” A clear image of Dennett’s educational or political philosophy did not emerge.23

Along with Gordon, Mary Warner Blanchard labeled Dennett as a socialist. However, Blanchard used the term to denote Dennett’s concern for the economic realities of the artisan in the industrial age. She noted Dennett’s “‘ethical’ framework for art, stressing not aesthetic detachment but fundamental economic change” for the artisan.24

David Kennedy recounted the key strategic differences that caused the high level of tension between Sanger and Dennett. He covers Dennett’s emphasis on legislative reform in a clean bill versus Sanger’s use of direct action and a doctors-only bill. Surprisingly, he indicated that Sanger eventually agreed with Dennett’s strategy for legislative reform, albeit legislation with very different content, rather than relying on acts of civil disobedience.25

Dennett Recognized

Despite Dennett’s curious omission from birth control history, some scholars have conceded that Dennett’s contributions were important. For example, Gene Burns called Dennett’s position in the birth control arena, the “second most dominant within the movement.” He stated that “Sanger was indeed ultimately much more influential and politically effective [than Dennett], but the relative emphasis on Sanger over Dennett is


24 Mary Warner Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age* (Hartford: Yale University, 1998), 237.

greatly out of proportion to their importance....” Burns offers an explanation for the undo emphasis on Sanger by saying, “Perhaps Sanger’s noted public relations success, and her tendency to downplay the contributions of others, was such that it outlasted her by several decades.”

Caroline Nelson, a contemporary of Sanger and Dennett’s and a one-time mutual friend expressed a similar view in a 1930 letter. In the letter to Dennett, Nelson commented on Sanger’s limitations related to her ego: “Margaret’s judgment cannot be depended on, that with all her splendid daring and heroic character in many ways, she is too much of an egotist to see clearly, or to tolerate any other woman’s talent in the movement. They must be her devoted slaves or nothing.”

Burns’ treatment of Dennett centers on her contributions to the birth control movement, particularly in comparison to Margaret Sanger and the Catholic Church. He shows how Dennett’s framing of the conversation was harder to accommodate than Sanger’s, because it had a broader moral agenda. Dennett’s approach was ultimately more radical than Sanger’s, because implicit in advocating for unrestricted access to birth control for all without the necessity of seeing a doctor first, was the sanction of sex for pleasure not just for reproduction. Therefore, Dennett found it more difficult to garner strategic alliances. Burns mentions *The Sex Side of Life*, but only as it related in general terms to the birth control discourse. He did not link Dennett’s implicit moral agenda regarding birth control with the explicit moral agenda she expressed in *The Sex Side of Life*.

---


27 Caroline Nelson, "Letter to Dennett" (MWD Papers, Reel 19, Apr 1, 1930).

Life. Those linkages are examined in this study because they provide a useful lens in which to consider Dennett’s emergence as a sex educator.

Rosen’s book on Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights deliberately highlights the lives of “four other vital leaders [not Sanger] whose contributions have not received the attention they deserve.”

Rosen devoted a 38-page chapter to Dennett in which she traced her political contributions to the birth control movement. She provided an overview of the strategic differences between her and Sanger and did a thorough job of identifying and tracing recurring themes in Dennett’s reform work, that is, Dennett’s commitment to individual rights, freedom of speech and freedom from government interference. Rosen’s treatment of Dennett and *The Sex Side of Life* centered on the legal aspects associated with it. Rosen stated: “The Dennett case has been credited with facilitating the expansion of the ACLU agenda to include all forms of censorship and to overcome its reticence to litigate cases with an overt sexual content.” Rosen’s analysis however is sometimes incomplete. For example, Rosen credits Dennett’s participation in the peace movement during the Great War for developing the “cornerstone of Dennett’s political career” – concern for civil liberties and disdain for government control.

Rosen did not substantiate that claim with a citation nor did she explain it further. She attempted to recreate reality using a data driven model that lacked the artful approach recommended by Freeman.

---


30 Ibid., 72-99.

31 Ibid., vii.
peace movement as the key experience defining her interest in civil liberties, rather than looking at the process of developing that interest, Rosen offered a static view of identity development rather than one that is nuanced.

Dennett’s concern for civil liberties and her critique of government actually began before her association with the Peace Movement and before the start of the Great War. For example, her suffrage work on both the state and federal level was an implicit criticism of government. Furthermore, Dennett and two others launched the first American birth control organization in 1915, The National Birth Control League, as a vehicle to stop government interference in the lives of women. She gave a stirring speech at the organizing meeting, criticizing the state’s repression of information. She pointed out that everyone shared “the absolute conviction … that correct information about birth control should be freely attainable.” The following research examines Dennett’s political growth in the post-modern tradition, viewing identity formation as “a creative process” in which forces from both the political and social spheres color and shape the patterns of identity.

In his 1995 article, John Craig connects Dennett’s views on suffrage with her approach to birth control, showing that Dennett’s belief in self-determination and equality informed her participation in both organizations. Craig provided an extensive summary of


33 Mary Ware Dennett, “Speech at the Meeting Which Organized The National Birth Control League” (MWD Papers, Reel 13, March, 1915).

Dennett’s reform activities and personal life. He also provided a detailed treatment of the legal significance of *The Sex Side of Life*, as it related to the expansion of the ACLU’s mission and to changes in the public perception of obscenity. However, he did not discuss Dennett’s emergence as a sex educator.  

Laura Weintraub begins her paper, *Lawyers, Libertines and the Reinvention of Free Speech*, with a serious error. Weintraub claimed that she was the first to identify Dennett’s obscenity trial as the pivotal event, which expanded the ACLU mission to include issues related to obscenity, sexuality and morality. As previously noted, several historians have made the same observation. In spite of that serious inaccuracy, Weintraub offered a helpful history about the ACLU in the early twentieth century. Dennett appeared in only a supporting role, as the transformation of the ACLU was the main theme.  

In her Masters’ Thesis, Rebecca Raible argued that the tension between Sanger and Dennett helped the birth control movement advance. She suggested that most historians omitted Dennett’s contributions, focusing almost exclusively on Sanger because they found it less complicated to focus on only one participant. Raible cited other social movements that have successfully used divergent opinions as a tool to promote the inclusion of different voices, creative thinking, and new strategies and opinions. She too appears to have a postmodern perspective about history. Unfortunately, Raible did not go


beyond mentioning *The Sex Side of Life*. It would be interesting to know what she thought about Dennett’s contribution to the sex education discourse.\(^{37}\)

Constance Chen’s 1996 biography, *The Sex Side of Life*, remains the only book length study of Dennett’s life and work. Chen provides a comprehensive look at her personal life, work, critical milestones and major conflicts.\(^{38}\) She created a compelling story about Dennett’s life – the personal tragedies and losses that shaped her worldview and her leadership role in many of the fundamental reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Chen drew upon an excess of rich material from Dennett’s unique life story that contained heroes, financial ruin, star-crossed lovers, adultery, scandal, political intrigue and a landmark court case – archetypes more often found in Gothic novels rather than in scholarly works of history. Moreover, Chen was able to gain access to family papers that offer a rich insight into Dennett’s affairs. Those papers are still not available in the public purview.\(^{39}\)

Chen wrote a long-delayed homage to Mary Ware Dennett. She fails, however to supply an adequate historical context with which to understand Dennett’s life.\(^{40}\) For example, she did not discuss Catherine Cooke Gilman, sex education advocate and Dennett’s sometime ally, or the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA).\(^{41}\) On

---

37 Rebecca Raible, “Conquering the Comstock Law: The Combined Efforts of Mary Ware Dennett and Margaret Sanger” (Masters' Thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 1997).

38 Chen, *Dennett*, 1996.

39 It is interesting to note that Constance M. Chen is a physician who specializes in Plastic Surgery. Her practice is in New York City.


41 Dennett and Gillman had an uneasy alliance and for a time they worked together to promote sex education. Gilman, however, was more conservative than Dennett and believed that detailed and scientific information could dilute the allure of commercial sex. She was more concerned with removing
Dennett’s motivation for writing *The Sex Side of Life*, Chen limited her analysis to saying, Dennett, a New Englander, felt more comfortable writing about sex than in discussing it and she wanted her children to grow up with more information than she had. While partially accurate and certainly charming, Chen did not provide a deeper analysis to help the reader understand Dennett’s approach to sexuality or her transition from mother to public sex educator. In addition, Chen’s work often lacks appropriate citations, particularly when she recounts the disagreements and tension between Sanger and Dennett.

Despite minor limitations, Chen provides a credible and well-written look at Dennett’s life and the contributions she made to early twentieth century reforms. Dennett was a complex historical figure, but thanks to Chen, we have a balanced view of Dennett’s multifaceted and nuanced life. The subsequent research builds on much of Chen’s study.

**Research Question**

*The real task [of history] is to describe the dawning of ideas and the creation of forms – surprising, strange, and awkward..., however familiar they may have become since – in response to the changing demands of circumstance.*

Bernard Bailyn, 1972

---


43 See the following reviews for additional critiques of Chen’s work: Mary E. Odem, review of “The Sex Side of Life: Mary Ware Dennett’s Pioneering Battle for Birth Control and Education,” by Constance Chen, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 9, no. 4 (October 2000); Ruth M. Alexander, review of “Mary Ware Dennett's Pioneering Battle for Birth Control and Sex Education,” by Constance Chen, *The New England Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (September 1997), 494-496.

the allure than educating youth, while Dennett wanted to provide comprehensive information. Leigh Ann Wheeler, "Rescuing Sex From Prudery and Prurience: American Women's Use of Sex Education as an Antidote to Obscenity, 1925-1932," *Journal of Women's History* 12, no. 3 (Autumn 2000).
The objective of the following research is to surface, examine and analyze the life events and historical context that facilitated Mary Ware Dennett’s ability not merely to write, but more notably, to publish and defend a radical sex education manual for adolescents. In many ways, Dennett was the quintessential New Englander: quiet, reserved, even dour yet invested in her community. What motivated and equipped Dennett to share her private and personal views about sexuality with other people’s children, and in doing so, to move from mother to teacher, from the reproductive to the productive sphere of influence? To answer that question, the foundation of Dennett’s intellectual and cultural heritage, her family influences and her identity formation are reviewed. Next, her development as a reformer and her belief in the primacy of knowledge and access to information are examined. The results from that research are situated into the historical and social context of her time – the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The decades in which Dennett lived and worked were a time when Americans struggled to make sense of a world that was fundamentally different from the one they had known. Industrialization, urbanization, the huge influx of immigrants and increased poverty and crime all contributed to feelings of loss and uncertainty. As a result, many

---


46 The gendered hierarchy has commonly been split into two distinct spheres of influence. Typical terms used to differentiate the two areas include work and home, public and private domains, and productive and reproductive spheres. The terms are used interchangeably and broadly. Thus, work, public and productive spheres include “political, social and cultural activities as well as economic ones,” and home, private and reproductive domains include maintaining the home and caring for its household members as well as the “reproduction of the species.” Jane Roland Martin, *Changing the Educational Landscape, Philosophy, Women and Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 79.
Americans of the Progressive era lacked a sense of community. They struggled to reinvent the idea of a unified public with the extensive reform work that characterized the period.

Relevance

_Empirical knowledge of the past is not merely useful but necessary to an understanding of our moral choices in the future._  

Contemporary educators, policy makers, and custodians of American tradition continue to grapple with many of the same issues that surfaced almost 100 years ago, when Dennett first published, _The Sex Side of Life_. In the early 1980s, the Christian Right began its anti-sex education crusade, such as when _Concerned Women of America_ fought against what they labeled the three threats to family life: sex education, global education and child pornography. The purity and chastity campaigns that began in the late 1990s mirrored similar crusades of the early 1900s.  

Attitudes towards sex education are complex and they are at the core of several much larger concerns. The public conversation about the substance of sex education, its underlying principles, whether to offer it at all and who should make those decisions, raises questions about a host of additional themes that often mirror, reinforce or challenge the existing social order.

Interwoven within the debate over sex education are deeply held belief systems about morality and its impact on the _state of the union_. Zimmerman observed the link as opponents of sex education during the 1960s expressed it by saying: “Sex education became a symbol of everything that was promiscuous, permissive, and decadent in

---


American life.”\textsuperscript{49} Additionally, Moran believed the debate over sex education that began in the 1960s was a potent symbol of the conflict experienced during “the culture wars over the moral direction of the United States, for it involves both sexuality and family authority, and the debates necessarily become debates over control of the coming generation.”\textsuperscript{50}

An interconnectedness exists whereby the cultural landscape is mirrored in educational practice, and educational practice reinforces existing cultural norms. The discussions are often contentious because undergirding the debate are multifaceted questions such as cultural reproduction, that is, who decides what culture is reproduced and who has control over the next generation. Conflicting views about sexuality and sexual orientation surface, as do partisan approaches to gender, religion, individual freedom, race and democratic values. Consequently, discourse about sex education functions as a bellwether for the social and political climate informing the debate. The dispute serves as a lightning rod for polarization.\textsuperscript{51}

Strongly oppositional views were common at the start of the twentieth century when Dennett wrote The Sex Side of Life and continue today. Carrie D. Wolinetz, a teacher of reproductive biology, expressed the link between sex education and morality in a letter to the Washington Post in 2004. She said the country’s teens were completely unaware about the fundamentals of reproduction, yet we expect them to decide about


\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 217.
major health matters “– about everything from fertility treatment to contraception – with scanty or false information because we cannot separate the biology of reproduction from the morality of sexual behavior.”

Examples of social control that are linked to the restriction of sexual knowledge are everywhere. Frank Rich, media critic of The New York Times, reported about an incident involving PBS and the airing of a spot promoting the movie Kinsey in 2004. Alfred Kinsey helped to reform attitudes about sexuality in 1948 and 1953 with his publication of the Kinsey Reports, also known as Sexual Behavior in the Human Male and Sexual Behavior in the Human Female. The spot was not aired. PBS’s media manager sent an email to the movie’s distributor explaining the decision. He expressed concern over the content of the movie and the potential for “controversial press re: groups speaking out against the movie/subject matter” that could cause, “viewer complaints.” Rich wrote in response, “When they start pushing the panic button over ‘moral values’ at the bluest of TV channels, public broadcasting’s WNET, in the bluest of cities, New York, you know this country has entered a new cultural twilight zone.”

Because of George W. Bush’s conservative views on privacy, dissent, a free press and gay marriage, many Americans believed Bush was an advocate of social control and repression. That notion of control was reflected in the Bush administration’s promotion of abstinence-only education, where the flow of knowledge was restricted and regulated. As both the decision and the education president, he appropriated $1.5 billion

---


for abstinence-only education during his administration.55 No other sexuality education programs received federal funds during Bush’s administration despite unproven results. A task force of *A National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy* conducted a study on the efficacy of abstinence-only education. They concluded that there were no studies on abstinence-only programs with proof that they either reduced the number of teens having sex or reduced the number of teen pregnancies.”56

In a departure from the Bush administration’s focus on abstinence only education, President Obama allotted $375 million for the Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP). In addition to sex education, the program provides information about healthy relationships, personal finance and other life skills. The program is supposed to encourage teens to delay sexual activity. If they are already active, however, teens are encouraged to use birth control to prevent pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Funds for abstinence education were reinserted in the Affordable Healthcare Act of 2010 over objections from the Obama administration. About $50 million per year must be matched by the state.57

President Obama has attempted to frame the conversation about sex education in a different way. The 2010 Appropriations bill for sex education from the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services does not use words like comprehensive or abstinence only education. Instead, Obama wants to focus the conversation on the desired results of


56 According to Nicholas D. Kristof: “Mr. Bush means well. But "abstinence only" is a misnomer that in practice is an assault on sex education itself. There's a good deal of evidence that the result will not be more young rosy-cheeked virgins - it will be more pregnancies, abortions, gonorrhea and deaths from AIDS.” Nicholas D. Kristof, "Bush's Sex Scandal," *The New York Times*, February 16, 2005.

sex education – the program that reduces pregnancy and STDs.\textsuperscript{58}

The link between social control and sex education is compelling when reviewing the last century’s culture wars. It is especially so when comparing three central periods during that time span: today’s battles between the “guardians of tradition” and advocates for comprehensive family life education, the 1960s and the Progressive era. Consistent themes and parallel trends emerge when examining the motives of both advocates and opponents in the contemporary debate, the counterculture of the 1960s and the Progressive reform era. The current battlefields upon which cultural differences are fought are gay marriage, same sex unions and gays in the military. In the 1960s, the social divide was expressed through public discourse about sex and cohabitation outside of marriage.

Mary Ware Dennett’s story during the Progressive era was about the validity of sex for pleasure and social control. It is particularly worthy of examination because her arrest and trial became a cause célèbre at a time when the United States was deeply enmeshed in its most provocative personification of social control, eugenics. To fully appreciate the relevance of sex education and social control in contemporary American life, Mary Ware Dennett’s emergence as a sex educator is explored within the historical context of sex education, social control and cultural norms.

\textbf{Early Sex Education}

\textit{Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to a lifetime of purity including sexual abstinence from this day until the}

\textsuperscript{58}Sarah Kliff, “Obama’s Smart Sex Education Funding,” \textit{Newsweek}, December 2009.
I enter a biblical marriage relationship.\textsuperscript{59}

True Love Waits Pledge, 2009

Dennett was not the first to advocate for sex education, nor did she write the first sex education manual for children. In fact, members of the social purity movement first promoted “sex education” as early as 1880. Victorians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century associated sexual self-control with “work, industry, good habits, piety and noble ideals,” similar to what Freud later called sublimation. (See Illustration 1\textsuperscript{60}) They saw a relationship between sexuality and the values and cultural traditions of the existing social order.

They viewed sex and passion as a decadent activity that depleted “reserves” of energy, creativity and self-control and led to extravagance, speculation and impulsive behavior. Many nineteenth century Americans thought sexual pleasure caused illness, insanity or even death, and believed a passionate union could cause the birth of sickly, small or oversexed children. In an effort to

\textsuperscript{59} “True Love Waits (TLW)” pledge created by LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention, established in Nashville, Tennessee. It is one of the world’s largest providers of Christian products, including abstinence only paraphernalia under the brand name TLW. LifeWay Christian Resources, www.lifeway.com/tlw/ (accessed October 9, 2009).

\textsuperscript{60} Recreation from the Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Clean youth won’t cause wife to suffer..., Record number swhp0034
preserve the values of the dominant culture and the health of the community, the social
purists tried to repress sexual desire and activity. Thus, the social purists and social
hygienists who created early sex education materials meant to discourage sexual
activity by teaching children about the dangers of sexuality, including sex for pleasure,
masturbation and venereal diseases and about the basic principles of eugenics. ASHA
waged a war against “self abuse” and promiscuity and extolled the virtues of “self
control.”

Dennett advanced a very different pedagogical approach to sex education,
conceptually different than either Victorian repression promoted by the anti-vice
crusaders or the scare tactics promoted by Social Hygienists. By advocating for
comprehensive knowledge, she helped to move the discourse beyond the use of fear
campaigns designed to tamp down sexual activity. Dennett’s goal was to advance a
forthright and thorough understanding of sexuality, so that individuals could make
informed decisions based on scientific information and knowledge. Contemporary
purity crusades stand in direct opposition to the brand of comprehensive sex education
Dennett promoted.

The present-day purity crusade began as a grass roots movement in the 1980s, in
part because of concerns related to the AIDS pandemic. It includes purity pledges like the
quote at the start of this section from True Love Waits and offers for purchase an
assortment of paraphernalia and books created by or licensed by LifeWay Christian
Resources. A variety of items including purity rings and pendants, key chains and apparel

---
61 Strong, Early Sex Education, 1972, 131,132.
62 Ibid., 144, 146, 147. See Moran, Teaching Sex, for additional information about early sex
education/repression projects.
are meant to inspire young people and to serve as a daily reminder of their commitment to remain sexually pure. The True Life pledge is remarkably similar to a purity pledge, introduced by the White Cross Society in the nineteenth century. (See Illustration 2) 

Illustration 2: White Cross Pledge

WHITE CROSS PLEDGE
Blessed are the Pure in Heart

BY THE HELP OF GOD

1. To treat all women with respect, and endeavor to protect them from wrong and degradation.

2. To endeavor to put down all indecent language and coarse jests.

3. Maintain the law of purity as equally binding upon men and women.

4. To endeavor to spread these principles among my companions and to try and help my younger brothers.

5. To use every possible means to fulfill the command to "Keep Thyself Pure."


The exact date the purity pledge was written is unknown. However, an article published by the NY Times in 1885 about the White Cross Society, an organization that modeled itself after the Knights of Chivalry… without "the killing business," includes the pledge. The New York Times, "Knights of the White Cross, Young Men Pledging Themselves to Personal Purity," March 31, 1885; Recreation from John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, Intimate Matters, A History of Sexuality in America (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).
With today’s sex education debate paralleling similar discussions that took place in the early 1900s and 1960s, it is apparent that sex education discussions are ongoing and contentious. The questions raised are about social control, freedom of information and the health and well being of children. New knowledge about earlier debates can add clarity to the current discourse and offer additional strategies for action. To enhance the contemporary understanding of issues surrounding comprehensive versus abstinence only education, a selected narrative is offered, with analysis and historical perspectives that focus on the origins of Dennett’s ability to contribute to the public discourse regarding sex education.

**Personal Framework**

_The American Public is heavily taxed to maintain an increasing race of morons, which threatens the very foundations of our civilization. Over one-quarter of the total income of the state of New York is spent on the maintenance of asylums, prisons and other institutions for the care of the defective and diseased._

Margaret Sanger, 1926

My awareness about Mary Ware Dennett first surfaced while doing research for a course at the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. The need for additional research became clear after reading an article about Sanger’s self-promotion. Andrea Tone wrote that Black Market birth control information and devices were available well before Sanger became involved in the birth control movement. Tone examined the history of birth control devices and techniques between

---


1873, when birth control was first criminalized, and the early 1910s, when Sanger first became involved. Using compelling evidence, Tone disproved the historical myth describing those years as “birth control’s bleakest chapter.”

Additionally, she dismissed the notion that until Margaret Sanger entered the birth control field, not a single birth control device could be found – anywhere. Tone referred to the distortion of facts by Sanger and others concerning the absence of birth control information before Sanger’s involvement as propaganda. She wrote that Sanger’s was the first and primary voice to extol her status as hero of the fight for birth control. Sanger claimed that in 1913 she searched in vain for contraceptive information for almost one year, saying the search yielded “no information more reliable than that exchanged by any back-fence gossips in any small town.” Sanger’s claim has enjoyed a remarkable shelf life.

Tone found abundant evidence contradicting Sanger’s assertion. She uncovered documentation of a thriving trade in black market birth control, citing trade catalogs, birth control advertisements, private letters, credit reports and patents related to birth control, among the abundant proof that demonstrated the availability of birth control information and devices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Tone asserted that, “Long before Margaret Sanger rescued her fellow citizens from


contraceptive ignorance, Americans of all backgrounds had turned to the market, seeking control over their fertility and their lives.”  

If Tone’s claims were accurate, then it appeared that Sanger’s self-promotion manipulated the historical record. It was unclear if Sanger’s role, as written by Sanger herself and her supporters was accurate, or if Tone was misinformed. Those questions begged for answers and an analysis between the reality as written and the reality as established by primary source documentation.

The question of whether or not Sanger manipulated the historical record was set aside because something far more disturbing emerged about some Progressives. Evidence surfaced regarding Sanger’s considerable involvement with the American eugenics movement, a movement that sought to create human perfection through selective breeding. Eugenics swept through the United States during the first part of the twentieth century, giving voice to some of the most hideous aspects of American nativist, racist and elitist thought.

Evidence of Sanger’s alignment with the eugenics movement appears frequently in her work. It is hard to ignore words and phrases such as race betterment, sterilization, unfit and the quality of our population that appear prominently in her

69 Ibid.
70 The significance of Sanger’s central role in the history of reproductive freedom is not in dispute. However, certain details are revisited in order to surface Dennett’s role in the debate.
71 Although objective reality is a fluid construct, certain facts remain indisputable.
writings, debates and speeches.\textsuperscript{73} In \textit{The Birth Control Review}, Sanger declared, “Like the advocates of Birth Control, the eugenicists…. are seeking to assist the race towards the elimination of the unfit.”\textsuperscript{74} In another article she said that with birth control, “we should witness the gradual but certain lifting of the curse of the “unfit” and the subnormal.”\textsuperscript{75}

To many, particularly African Americans, Sanger’s historical involvement with eugenics remains deeply disturbing. Contemporary opponents of reproductive freedom use Sanger’s connection with eugenics as a propaganda tool against birth control, legalized abortion and sex education. To garner African American support, opponents of reproductive freedom say the aim of Sanger and other birth control advocates was and is to limit the population of African Americans by controlling their reproduction. Therefore, they claim it is in the best interests of African Americans to oppose abortion today. Comprised mainly of white Republicans, today’s right-wing conservatives, use phrases like, “Black Children are an endangered species” to gain African American support for anti-abortion legislation.\textsuperscript{76} They are capitalizing on systemic racism by exploiting African Americans’ fears of race suicide. It is ironic that today, white conservatives are using the fear of race suicide as a means of co-opting the legitimate concerns of African Americans. A century earlier, fears of race suicide were used to

\textsuperscript{73} In addition to several primary source documents that illustrate Sanger’s support for eugenics, scholars such as Dikotter recorded her association with eugenics. Frank Dikkotter, “Recent Perspectives on the History of Eugenics,” \textit{The American Historical Review} 103, no. 2 (April 1998): 467-468.

\textsuperscript{74} Margaret Sanger, “A Victory, a New Year and a New Day,” \textit{Birth Control Review} 3, no. 4 (February 1919).

\textsuperscript{75} Margaret Sanger, "Politicians vs. Birth Control," \textit{The Birth Control Review} v, no. v (May 1921), 4.

fuel both anti-immigrant and anti-black legislation, as well as the eugenics movement. It appears, however, that Dennett was not involved with eugenics and that became the original impetus for further research.

**Conceptual Framework**

*The promise of this kind of narrative inquiry work is that as we attend to wider, more multidimensional, and complex stories of history, our understandings of the past, as well as the present and future are increased. Multiple voices of the past can help educate us about our history, inform our present, and (we hope) improve our future.*

Morgan-Fleming, Riegle and Fryer, 2002

In the post modern historical tradition, multiple voices, even those of ordinary and marginalized people, function as necessary threads to create the tapestry of experiences that we call history. Listening to the Greek chorus of disparate voices enhances our understanding of the past and helps us to view history as a dynamic process, which is more like a cinema vérité than a still life painting. As a result, an examination of the influences that shaped Dennett’s development as a reformer and her contributions to public discourse are not only relevant but also necessary.

Using a post-modern feminist historical lens supports the assertion that Dennett’s voice deserves a place in history more prominent than that of afterthought. The relative merits of Dennett’s position in history, however, lie outside the scope of this project. The focus of the following research is on the dialectic between Dennett, her intellectual heritage, family influences, identity formation and the context that influenced her ability to publish *The Sex Side of Life*.

---

77 Morgan-Fleming et al., "Narrative Inquiry,” 2007, 78.

78 Use of the cinema vérité metaphor to show the value of multiple voices made possible by the Internet was stimulated by the mosaic/painting metaphor in Morgan-Fleming et al. Narrative Inquiry, 2007.
Clandinin and Connelly describe narrative inquiry as “…a way of understanding experience… as collaboration between researcher and participants…”79 Reflecting that connection, it is important to recognize that Dennett’s story resonates with ordinary people in several ways. Her single-minded commitment to a logical and consistent personal belief system and the courage she displayed in maintaining the integrity of those beliefs is worthy of admiration. Dennett resigned from at least three organizations because of her philosophical differences with the majority of members – the Boston Society of Boston Arts and Crafts, the National American Woman Suffrage Association and The National Birth Control League.80 All three situations related to Dennett’s evolving political approach to social reform.

Because Dennett published The Sex Side of Life, she sustained censor from the U.S. Post Office for which she was eventually arrested and charged with obscenity in 1929. The subsequent trial for distributing The Sex Side of Life and the public outrage that followed, helped to clarify the place of the Bill of Rights in American Society.81 Additionally, the unexpected public support she received facilitated expansion of the ACLU’s mission. Initially, the ACLU focused on political dissidents, union activists and members of the anti-war movement.82 After Dennett’s 1929 trial, however, the

79 Ibid., 81.
ACLU expanded to include legislation related to obscenity, reproductive freedom and sexuality. Dennett was a well-rounded woman and appreciated that quality in others.

Dennett wrote to her cousin, Robert Tristram Coffin, praising the biography he wrote about his father, a common person. She liked it because it was not about the usual brilliant and famous “neurotic geniuses” and “single-minded zealots” that biographies usually exalt. Best of all believed Dennett, were the well-rounded people, “alive in all directions, and who have many kinds of faculties in use their whole lives through. They are less famous than the people of one idea, but in the long run, I believe they add more to the value and joy of life.”

Dennett was an exemplar of the well-rounded individual and was the sort of person she herself described as “best of all” – “alive in all directions” – adding much to the “value and joy of life.” Her appreciation for the multidimensional everyman foreshadows postmodern feminist historical practice, where the voices of ordinary and often marginalized people are both valued and necessary to include in the narrative. In that tradition, the life of Mary Ware Dennett, a woman marginalized by history is reconsidered.

Objective reality is a term that historians contemplate because a particular historical reality depends on the sources the historian has available and chooses to consider. According to Novak, objective reality is a fluid construct. He described it as trying to nail jelly to the wall.

---


84 Mary Ware Dennett, “Letter to cousin Robert Tristram Coffin” (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, January 21, 1932).

not impossible to ferret out objective reality. The *reality* in the following research is subjective in nature and in the tradition of Narrative Inquiry, it centers on the particular rather than on the general. At its core is an analysis of one women’s agency, that is, her move from the private to the public sphere of influence. It includes experiences, influences and context. It is dialectical, rather than static.\(^{86}\)

Merriam defined three common strategies to analyze life stories. First, the psychological framework uses the individual as the unit of analysis, with a focus on identity formation, development and motivation. Secondly, a biographical approach looks at the individual within a social context.\(^{87}\) According to Denzin, a biography considers other influences as well, such as gender, class, major turning points and family origins. “These conventions serve to define the biographical method as a distinct approach to the study of human experience.”\(^{88}\) Lastly, discourse analysis studies the form of the story, the way in which the spoken or written word conveys the narrative. Merriam summarizes the framework of analysis by saying, “Whatever the approach to analyzing data, the central defining feature of this type of qualitative research [narrative] is that the data are in the form of a story.” The first two strategies described by Merriam, the psychological and biographical aspects of analysis, are the main methods employed to illuminate Dennett’s narrative.\(^{89}\)

---

\(^{86}\) Narrative inquiry is more descriptive than analytical and focuses on the particular rather than on the general. Morgan-Fleming et al. “Narrative Inquiry,” 2007, 82, 83.


By examining the wealth of available primary source documents about Dennett’s life story, the influences, both private and public, that contributed to her emergence as a radical sex education reformer in the public sphere are explored. The initial portion of the biographical research draws from three principal influences. The first, Dennett’s intellectual heritage, includes an examination of her cultural origins, the intergenerational family characteristics that traveled across the Atlantic from old England all the way to New England. Distinct Coffin traits contributed to the family’s culture, and in turn, the Coffin legacy that affected Dennett. The second delves into Dennett’s identity formation by looking at the role her family played in shaping her development. Lastly, her intellectual and personal identity formation as well as her social activism are situated within the historical and social context in which she lived and worked.

Consistent with what David Hackett Fischer describes as a braided narrative, the following study combines elements of the old history, that is biographical information or storytelling with elements of the new, that is problem-solving and perspectives about “change and continuity in the acts and thoughts of ordinary people – people in the midst of others; people in society.”90 Mark Freeman recommends an artful approach to biographical understanding saying, “The challenge at hand, is a poetic one, the foremost aim being not to reproduce reality but to actualize and explicate it, to bring meaning into being in such a way that the world is made visible.”91 The following narrative is intended

---


to provide a rich and textured story that helps to *explicate* Dennett’s action when she first published *The Sex Side of Life*.

**Methodology**

The Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library houses 18.25 linear feet of archival documents that include personal and professional correspondence, organizational materials, photographs and position and childhood school papers. The material, organized into five topical categories includes Dennett’s personal papers and her involvement with the arts and crafts, suffrage and birth control and sex education movements as well as other organizations and causes. All are available on microfiche at a selection of university libraries. The Library at the New York Academy of Medicine houses a small Dennett case collection. It contains correspondence related to her trial, copies of *The Sex Side of Life*, newspaper clippings, typed and manuscript notes, and the Brief from the U.S. vs. Mary Ware Dennett case. Dennett’s personal papers contain a surfeit of interesting and varied material directly related to this research project. In addition, the archives were mined for leads to supplementary sources that provided additional perspectives about Dennett. For example, in a letter from Dennett to her grandson, Peter, she cited an important book that provided useful information about Dennett’s ancestors.

*The History of Boscawen and Webster [N.H.] from 1733-1878* is a two-volume set written by Dennett’s Great Uncle Charles Carleton Coffin. Great Uncle Charles wrote a history about the settlement of each town and its civil, military, educational and religious heritage. In addition, Charles included biographical sketches of several Coffins, including Rebecca Hazeltine and her husband Captain Peter Coffin, Mary’s great, great, grandparents. Charles traced Mary’s forbears to Sir William Coffin, a high-ranking
officer in the court of King William VIII. Although primary source documents from Dennett’s personal collection abound, secondary source materials about her are limited.

**Summary**

With her commitment to the diffusion of knowledge and respect for individual agency, Dennett vigorously challenged government officials and the obscenity laws they attempted to enforce for over thirty years. She left an enduring imprint on the historical record, mainly because of the 1918 publication of *The Sex Side of Life* in which she presented frank and accurate information about the biology and practice of sex. That candid approach was in direct opposition to mainstream attitudes towards sex education, which sought to repress sexuality rather than to provide information about it.

What prompted Mary Ware Dennett, a reticent and private New Englander, to share her personal belief system about sexuality with the public at large? In response to that question, the foundation of Dennett’s intellectual and cultural legacy is examined and situated into the social and historical context of her time. By means of a braided narrative Dennett’s story unfolds, offering insight and strategies to address present-day battles between advocates for comprehensive sex education and advocates for abstinence-only education.

Scholars have given the career and philosophy of Mary Ware Dennett very little attention since her death in 1947. Dennett’s contributions are easily overlooked because she shunned public scrutiny of her personal life and was not as captivating a leader as Margaret Sanger or as confrontational by nature as Emma Goldman. Consequently, only

---

a few have recognized the significance of her work in the sex education and birth control movements.

The foundation for a rich and textured look at Dennett’s emergence as a sex educator is established by looking at the values, customs and norms that influenced her development. Specific attention is given to the experiences and contextual elements related to Dennett’s publication of *The Sex Side of Life*. Dennett’s story begins with an examination of her cultural and intellectual development as a reformer. It continues through her marriage and divorce, raising two sons, and her disenchantment with organizations’ battles over tactics and values. Her clear and consistent voice stood out from the rest.
CHAPTER II: FOREBEARS, FAMILY AND FIRST YEARS

Introduction

Several interconnecting themes contributed to Dennett’s inescapable development as a lifelong reformer and activist. Chapter Two identifies and examines the themes transmitted through her cultural and intellectual heritage by means of her ancestors, extended family and New England childhood. The braided narrative begins with intergenerational perspectives and biographical information about Dennett, serving as the foundation for considering her transition from the private to the public sphere of influence.”1 (See Appendix A to view a table of Coffin Family Genealogy)

Surrounded by family members who related stories about her celebrated Coffin ancestors, Dennett absorbed many of their character traits and followed their example. Coffin ancestors distinguished themselves with their pioneering spirit. They showed fortitude and responsibility, frugality and generosity, and they shared a commitment to social justice and the diffusion of knowledge through education. Extended family members of her childhood were historians, intellectuals and social activists in the suffrage and world peace movements. They served as mentors, models and resources that strengthened central Coffin characteristics. Dennett’s New England childhood with its strong Puritan and intellectual influence reinforced the characteristics of her ancestors and extended family. Her forebears and family culture contributed to Dennett’s motivation and capacity to share her private and personal views about sexuality with other people’s children and to publish The Sex Side of Life.

1 Hackett Fisher, Albion’s Seed, 1989, ix.
**Family System Theory**

Dennett belonged to a multigenerational family system, a system of interlocking relationships between family members across several generations who shared specific beliefs, functionalities, values, behaviors and responses.\(^2\) According to Murray Bowen, pioneer in the field of Family Therapy and creator of the *Family Systems Theory*, families in the present can be understood within the context of the family system of the past. Emotional forces transmitted from one generation to another are powerful molders of a person’s development. “The transmission occurs on several interconnected levels ranging from the conscious teaching and learning of information to the automatic and unconscious programming of emotional reactions and behaviors.”\(^3\) The multigenerational family system, the primary unit of analysis in this chapter, helps to explain recurring themes in the Coffin family line.

The Coffins maintained exceedingly close relationships. Their intimacy very likely resulted in a multigenerational family system that was more interconnected than most. According to Potters Monthly, an Illustrated Magazine of History, Literature, Science and Art, the Coffins were especially *clannish*, and stayed close through good times and bad. They believed that family relations were more important than any others, and even considered cousins in the eighth and ninth generations as relatives. “As a rule, too, they are great kissers and never hesitate – the masculine portion of them, I mean – to embrace in the most affectionate manner, the wives, sisters and daughters of their

---


remotest kin. Nor have I observed that these feminine cousins ever strenuously oppose such demonstrations.”4 As Dennett’s intellectual and cultural heritage is examined, an image begins to emerge and take shape of Dennett as an innovative, principled and courageous activist who lived most of her years fully engaged in the dynamic side of life – reform work and family relationships.

Chapter Two is about the context and associations – ancestral, familial and cultural – that informed her identity as an activist. Daniel Webster spoke eloquently from Plymouth Rock in 1820 about the value of associating with ancestors by “contemplating their example, and studying their character; by partaking their sentiments and imbibing their spirit; by accompanying them in their toils; by sympathizing in their sufferings, and rejoicing in their successes and their triumphs.” By connecting to our ancestors through stories and family lore, “we seem to belong to their age and to mingle our existence with theirs.”5 This chapter explores the ways in which Dennett associated with her ancestors, mingling her existence with theirs. It looks at direct and indirect methods of transmitting central Coffin characteristics and evidence showing that Dennett studied their character. A brief examination of Dennett’s ancestors from old England helps to establish the power and consistency of core Coffin characteristics that undergird Dennett’s reform work, particularly related to their pioneering spirit, fortitude and sense of responsibility.

5 Coffin, History of Boscawen, 1878, xvii.
Forebears

Old England

Dennett’s ancestors were people of courageous actions and civic responsibility. Coffin family history can be traced to Sir Richard Coffin from Normandy. Sir Richard arrived in England with William the Conqueror in 1066, at which time he was allocated the manor of Alvington in Devonshire. Records from Devonshire favorably reference Sir Richard during the time of Henry II, as well as Sir Elias Coffin, and Knight of Clist in the days of King John, Sir Jeffrey Coffin and Combe Coffin during the reign of Henry III, and to the issues of these knights under successive reigns. Sir William Coffin of Portledge, Sherriff of Devonshire was “highly preferred at court and one of eighteen assistants chosen by the king to accompany him to a tournament in France in 1519.” He was also high Stewart of the Manor and Liberties of Stanton in Hereford and a high-ranking officer under Henry VIII. At Sir William’s death, he left to his “great Master, King Henry VIII, and with whom he had lived in intimate relations [serving as privy to the chamber] and especial grace and favor, his best horses and a cast of his best hawks.”

While Coffin forebears in old England demonstrated their fortitude and responsibility in service to their king, American Coffins demonstrated the same qualities while serving their families, community and nation. The American Coffins were pioneers.

---

6 The name Coffin comes from the Hebrew language and means small basket. According to one source, “Probably (as nearly as can be traced) the family passed from Palestine to Greece several hundred years before A.D. From Greece going to the South of France and removing to England from there.” Lossing, ed., Potters, 1873, 14.

who were hard working and civic-minded and they believed in education as a means to a better life.

**New England**

... *I hardly know what should bear with stronger obligation on a liberal and enlightened mind than a consciousness of alliance with excellence, which is departed.*

Daniel Webster, 1820

The lives of Dennett’s forbears provided an abundant source of *excellence* from which she developed a *liberal and enlightened mind*, fully engaged in the dynamic side of life. Tristram Coffin (1609-1681), Dennett’s great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather and founder of the American Coffin line, moved from Brixton, Devonshire in old England to Salisbury, Massachusetts in New England in 1642. Tristram made the journey just one year after the great migration of 1630-1641, when 80,000 English men, women and children sailed to the New World to avoid religious persecution. Not all of the first American settlers in New England fled England in pursuit of religious freedom as the Puritans did. Tristram as a Royalist did not agree with Oliver Cromwell’s political beliefs, the widespread anti-Royalist sentiment of the parliamentarians and the short-lived English Commonwealth that appeared imminent. He left his comfortable life in England, where some said he owned a number of estates, travelling to America with his mother, Joanna Thember (n.d.-1661); wife, Dionis Stephens; sisters, Mary and Eunice;  

---


9 Ibid, 491.


and his five children. Much later, Tristram’s sister Mary married Alexander Adams, ancestor to the Adams’ presidents.

Settling first in Salisbury, Massachusetts, they moved to Haverhill, then to Newbury and back again to Salisbury. In 1659, Tristram and several others purchased nine tenths of Nantucket Island, and in 1660, he moved there with several of his nine children. Each of the original owners of the island received twenty-two and a half acres of land. The balance of the island, 20,000 acres, was held in trust for the 3,000 Native Americans of Nantucket. Tristram was regarded as the patriarch of the colony, respected by both settlers and Native Americans. In 1671, he was appointed Chief Magistrate. Ignoring the laws of primogeniture, Tristram left all his land to his youngest son, Stephen, suggesting that Tristram was unafraid of casting aside convention. Successive generations of Coffins did the same in pursuit of their ideals.

The Coffins were civic-minded citizens with a strong sense of community. Tristram served two terms as governor of the island and several Coffins in subsequent generations held public office as well. Tristram’s eldest son, Peter Coffin (1631-n.d.), served as Associate and Chief Justice of New Hampshire’s Supreme Court and Peter and Rebecca’s son, Thomas (1777-1853) served as a selectman and state representative.

---

12 Anna Davis Hallowell, *James and Lucretia Mott. Life and Letters*, ed. Their Granddaughter Anna Davis Hallowell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1884), 1920; By One of Them, "Trustrum" and His Grandchildren (Nantucket: Published by the author, 1881), 11.

13 Lukens, *Coffin Family*, 1897, 41.


notable exception to the tradition of holding public office involved Captain Peter Coffin (1722-1789), Tristram’s great, great grandson. The people of Boscawen, New Hampshire chose him to serve as constable without his consent. Because they refused to accept his decision not to take the job, he hired another man to serve in his place.\textsuperscript{18} Captain Peter, however, had other qualities that distinguished him as a civic-minded patriot and active community member.

**Boscawen New Hampshire**

The Coffin line in Boscawen began with John Coffin (1694-1762). John was Mary’s great, great, great grandfather and the great grandson of Tristram. In 1732, John Coffin, along with eighty others from Newbury Massachusetts, petitioned the General Court of Massachusetts Bay for a tract of land, seven miles square, then under the jurisdiction of Massachusetts. The petition was granted and the parcel of land, situated on the west side of the Merrimack River was given to John Coffin and the other petitioners of the grant. In 1733, John’s brother and Harvard graduate\textsuperscript{19}, Colonel Joseph Coffin, was unanimously voted to serve as clerk at the first meeting of the proprietors, a position he held for twenty-eight years. He was chosen because “Joseph Coffin was a gentleman of good natural abilities, a handsome common education and a very ready

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 335.

\textsuperscript{19} Harvard was founded in 1636. An early brochure said Harvard was established “to advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches.” Harvard University, *The Harvard Guide: History, Lore and More*, www.news.harvard.edu/guide (accessed July 6, 2010).
scribe.”20 Originally named Contoocook by Native Americans, it was not until the town was incorporated in 1760, that the name was changed to Boscawen.21

Dennett’s great uncle, historian and journalist Charles Carleton Coffin wrote about the early settlers of Boscawen and their readiness to support public worship and education as necessary to the welfare of the community. In the very beginning, the first settlers hired a minister, established a church and built a meetinghouse. Even while experiencing the privation of the Colonial and Revolutionary eras and including the times they lived in a garrison, the first order of business at each town meeting concerned appropriations for the minister. The same commitment was observed regarding education: “It will be further noticed, that during the Colonial war, when taxes were burdensome, and through the Revolution, when their currency was worthless, they supported public schools.”22

Similar to other New England communities, the voters of Boscawen believed that “Men must be intelligent to be good citizens and Christians.” In 1809, under a new local law, school districts were established and ordered to build new schoolhouses. A superintendent committee was appointed and “young gentlemen” from Dartmouth were hired to teach. In Boscawen, the notion that a subject matter expert or master was all that was necessary to teach, gave way to a newer concept. The committee believed that in

20 Rev. Mr. Price, History of Boscawen, 1732-1820 (Jacob B. Moore, 1823), 20-23, 53.

21 Although no specific evidence exists regarding the origin of the town’s name of Boscawen, it is interesting to note that, Peter Coffyn, the grandfather of Tristram Coffin, the first Coffin to emigrate to America in 1642, married Mary Boscawen in1560. Mary Coffin Johnson, Charles F. Coffin, A Quaker Pioner (Richmond: Nicholson Printing Company, 1923), iii.

22 Coffin, History of Boscawen, 1878, xiv. In his history of Boscawen and Webster, Mary’s great Uncle Charles included engaging stories about Coffin ancestors living in Boscawen.
addition to knowledge, the educator must be a teacher. To further improve learning, the committee voted to visit each school to observe and determine ways in which the schools could improve. Thus, Dennett’s early ancestors of Boscawen participated in a community deeply committed to education. They passed that belief in education down to succeeding generations.23

Uncle Charles expressed his deep regard for education in general and the role of teachers in particular to the development of the individual and the community. He wrote that teachers were mind-builders, “holding the future well-being of the community in their hands; and in a history of a town which has moved steadily upward to a higher plane of civilization they should have honorable mention.” He then listed several dozen teachers of Boscawen before 1800.24

Mary Coffin Ware Dennett was proud of her ancestors and as Daniel Webster suggested, she contemplated their example and studied their character. Dennett had direct contact with her great uncle Charles Carleton Coffin, looking up to him as the role model for her mentor, Lucia Ames Mead. It is likely that his reverence for education influenced Dennett’s similar respect for knowledge. Mingling her existence with theirs, she followed their model and linked her personal and political philosophy with carefully reasoned actions, just as they did. She recognized the significance of their cultural legacy to succeeding generations, and she shared exploits about them with her grandson, Peter Vaughan Dennett. In a letter she wrote to him, Dennett demonstrated her specific knowledge of, and pride in, her Coffin ancestors.

23 Coffin, History of Boscawen, 1878, 285, 286.
24 Ibid., 169, 285, 286, 298.
She told her grandson Peter a story involving Rebecca Hazeltine, Mary’s great, great grandmother. Rebecca was married to Captain Peter Coffin (1722-1789), John’s son who was “prominent in public affairs, especially in energetic resistance to the oppression of the mother country.” Dennett wrote:

*Captain Peter was a good deal of a fellow, according to the stories in The History of Boscawen, by Uncle Charles Carleton Coffin. He was a member of the Provincial Congress held at Exeter, April 21, 1775, and he served in the campaign of 1777 to defeat Burgoyne.*

Rebecca shared the intense patriotic spirit of her husband Captain Peter that was characteristic of the citizens in their hometown of Boscawen, New Hampshire during the Revolutionary War. In 1777, just before Captain Peter Coffin and a local company marched off with General Stark to fight the British General John Burgoyne, Rebecca noticed that two of the soldiers had no shirts. She was nine months pregnant, but nonetheless, she cut some unfinished material from her loom and stayed up the entire night sewing shirts for the two soldiers. Only nine days later, her son Thomas was born.

Continuing the letter, Dennett described Rebecca to her grandson as:

*... a stout American rebel, and when the Stamp Act was passed, to tax tea, she resolutely put away the few ounces of tea in her caddy and would not have any of it used until the stamp act was repealed.*

---


26 Rebecca’s story appears in three separate sources: Notes to grandson, Peter Vaughn Dennett; Coffin’s History of Boscawen and Elliot Griffis’ Charles Carleton Coffin, War Correspondent, Traveller, Author and Statesman. The first two sources indicate that Rebecca gave birth in a matter of days after she made the soldier’s shirts. However, the later source indicated that one month had passed before Thomas Coffin was born.

27 Mary Ware Dennett, “Notes to grandson, Peter Vaughan Dennett, on stationary from 24-30 29th St., formerly 82 Singer St. typewritten” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, n.d.).
Dennett concluded the letter to her grandson by saying, “So, you see, Peter there was real stuff in some of your old fore-bears.”

Dennett’s use of the phrase _real stuff_ to describe Rebecca’s patriotic activity suggests that she recognized and admired Rebecca as a woman of action. To Mary, _real stuff_ was more than philosophizing or talking. _Real stuff_ meant action and only action was the _real stuff_. Generations later, Mary became a woman of action as well, and like Rebecca, she made no distinction between her personal belief system and the reform work she spent so much of her life pursuing. For Dennett, believing in a principle meant acting upon it.

Dennett’s letter to her grandson makes it clear that she read at least parts of the book her great uncle Charles Carleton Coffin (1823-1886) wrote about Boscawen. Some of the stories she shared with Peter are duplicated, almost verbatim, from those found in Charles’ book. It is more likely, however, that Dennett read the entire book because she was an extremely able student with an inquisitive mind.

In the _History of Boscawen_, Dennett’s great uncle Charles included several stories about Rebecca Hazeltine, as well as anecdotes about other memorable Coffin ancestors. For example, a month after Rebecca’s baby Thomas was born Captain Coffin had to leave yet again. Rebecca was left at home alone with five children ranging in age from a baby of four weeks to the oldest of seven years. The wheat was ripe, the birds were feasting on it and the wind was blowing the seeds away. The wheat had to be harvested yet almost everyone who might have been able to help was off fighting back the British. Rebecca was in a quandary with very few options.

---

28 Ibid.

29 Coffin, _History of Boscawen_, 1878, 336, 337.
Eventually she remembered the Littles, a family with several sons, who lived some distance away. She recalled them because the previous summer she provided the family with bread and milk while Mr. Little built their cabin. Perhaps one of them could help she reasoned. Making her decision, she saddled her mare, and taking her infant of five weeks in her arms, she set off, leaving her eldest, a child of seven, in charge of the younger children. She rode through the forest up Corser Hill and forded both Beaver-dam brook and the Blackwater, finally arriving at the Little’s cabin. There she was met with unanticipated news. The older boys were in the army, leaving only fourteen year old Enoch at home. Mrs. Little said, “Enoch can go, but he has no clothes. The boy has no coat, vest, hat, stockings or shoes. His only garments are a ragged pair of tow-and-linsey pants, and a ragged shirt.”³⁰

Rebecca replied that she could “provide him with a coat.” Then, off they went, Rebecca riding in front while holding baby Thomas, with Enoch riding behind. They rode back through the forest to Rebecca’s house, where she promptly set to work, making Enoch a coat. Mrs. Coffin had no cloth, so she made him a primitive coat from a meal-bag, sewing her own stockings on the coat for sleeves. Next, Rebecca went into the field with baby Thomas. She laid him underneath the shade of a tree and began binding the sheaves of wheat.³¹

Captain Peter Coffin and his wife Rebecca Hazeltine were distinguished by their generosity in Boscawen. They were known as the poor man’s friend, feeding new settlers who travelled to New Hampshire. Their home was located on the edge of civilization and

³⁰ Ibid., 337.

³¹ Ibid.
often served as a convenient resting stop for new settlers. “No matter how scarce the grain or how high the current price, he never made a man’s necessity his own opportunity.” Deacon Enoch Little, the boy who had helped Rebecca harvest the wheat when Captain Peter was off to war said he had often enjoyed a bowl of bread and milk at their home when he was a child. He frequently commented that without their kindness it was unlikely that the Littles would have survived their first year in Boscawen.\(^{32}\)

By all accounts, Rebecca Hazeltine Coffin was an extraordinary woman. According to Mary’s great uncle Charles, “She was a remarkable woman of great energy and character, and trained her sons to prize character above everything else. All honor to her memory.”\(^{33}\) Her son Thomas, respected citizen and abolitionist, learned his mother’s lessons well.

**Coffin Abolitionists**

Lieutenant Thomas Coffin (1777-1853), son of Captain Peter and Rebecca, Mary’s great grandfather and Tristram’s great, great, great, great grandson, was a disciplined man of character. He was as strongly patriotic and committed to his beliefs as both his parents were to theirs. Thomas was a civic-minded resident of New Hampshire who served as both a selectman and a representative in 1810-1811 and 1831 respectively. He was a kind man who contributed generously to the building of the Congressional Meeting House and he was well respected in his community. Most significantly, he was active “in the anti-slavery cause, and circulated petitions for the abolition of slavery in


\(^{33}\) Coffin, *History of Boscawen*, 1878, 337.
the territories, when there was a strong prejudice against any interference with the institution.”

When three families of black folks moved into an abandoned building in Boscawen, they sent their children to the local Corser Hill School, causing a great commotion. The townspeople, although deeply religious, threatened to close the school if the children continued to attend. To show his support and sympathy for the black families involved, and to protest the racism of the townspeople, Thomas provided work for them, although he did not need their assistance. Thomas’ son Charles Carleton Coffin, Mary’s great uncle, took after his father becoming a passionate abolitionist as well.

As a boy, Charles read all the anti-slavery material he could find including *The Liberator, Herald of Freedom* and *Emancipator*. Hanging on his bedroom wall was a poster of a slave in chains with the words, “Am I not a man and a brother?” Those words were the first he saw each morning upon rising and the last he saw before closing his eyes at night. The Coffin dedication to the abolition of slavery also continued in another branch of the family.

Levi Coffin (1798-1877), another great, great, great, great grandson of Tristram Coffin, was an abolitionist as well. He was the son of Levi and Prudence Coffin, Quaker farmers who moved from Nantucket to New Garden North Carolina in 1773. The son

---

34 Ibid., 1878, 492.
35 William Elliot Griffis, Charles Carleton Coffin, War Correspondent, Traveller, Author and Statesman (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1898), 34, 35.
36 Ibid., 35.
Levi was born in North Carolina. Regarding the origin of his abolitionist passion, Levi acknowledged the influence of his family by stating that he inherited his abhorrence to slavery from them. His parents and grandparents were both against it and nobody on either side of the family ever owned slaves. Family members were allies to the exploited.38

In addition to the influence of his family, Levi attributed his abolitionist zeal to an incident that occurred when he was a child. Levi was out with his father who was chopping wood when they saw a group of handcuffed and shackled black men being forced to walk down the road. When they drew closer, Levi’s father asked where they were going and why they were in chains. One man answered, “They have taken us away from our wives and children, and they chain us lest we should make our escape and go back to them.”39 Slave traders were taking them further south where they would be sold to plantation owners. Levi’s father explained the institution of slavery in terms the child could understand. Levi could not imagine his life without his father, and at that moment, he developed a keen sympathy for the oppressed and an enduring loathing towards injustice “which were the motives that influenced my whole life.” He was just seven years old at the time.40

Although it was a capital offense in North Carolina to aid a fugitive slave, as a boy of fifteen Levi did just that. He began to warn runaways if their capture was imminent and he brought food to them in the fields where they hid. Later, he organized a

38 Ibid., 11.
Sunday school for Negroes. In 1847, he moved to Cincinnati Ohio where he opened a free labor store, a store that did not sell products or goods produced by slave labor. He personally helped over 3,000 slaves reach freedom and the slave hunters who searched for runaways gave him the title of President of the Underground Railroad.  

Levi Coffin, widely known as a friend to the slaves, shared his house with runaway slaves in his effort to help them reach safety. A New York Times article said Harriet Beecher Stowe modeled the home of the old Quaker in Uncle Tom’s Cabin on Levi and Catherine Coffin’s house. Another source indicated that Levi and his wife Catherine served as models for Simeon and Rachael Halliday, Quaker characters who assisted runaway slaves in the course of their getaway. Other family members also contributed to the Coffin family tradition of social responsibility, education and intellectual achievement.

Coffins of Note

Described by some as “the greatest woman of her time,” Lucretia Coffin Mott (1793-1880), Quaker minister, temperance activist, abolitionist and women’s suffrage advocate, shared the Coffin penchant for social justice. She was known as one of the most remarkable of intuitive thinkers exhibiting another Coffin characteristic, that of scholar and intellectual. Elizabeth Oakes Smith, longtime colleague of Lucretia Coffin...

41 Lukens, Coffin Family, 1897, 43-45; Yannessa, Coffin, 2001, 36.


43 Coffin Johnson, Charles F. Coffin, 1923, 51.

44 Lukens, Tristram Coffin Family, 1897, 31; Coffin, History of Boscawen, 1878.
Mott, acknowledged the significance of her heritage when describing her family after a visit to Nantucket:

> I was struck by the self-poise of these people {Nantucket residents] and hardly wondered that Lucretia Mott, allied to them by the Folgers and the Coffins, should be what she was. It was the best of the Quaker blood, and the best of that of our hardy, enterprising sea captains whose keels plowed the deep soundings of the Arctic seas in pursuit of the whale and the walrus. A strong race, little affected by mere conventionalities, but bearing the impress of the culture and social stamina of the times of Milton ....

Additional Coffins worthy of note include poet Robert Stevenson Coffin (1797-1827) with three books still in print; reporter and writer Roland Folger Coffin (1826-1888) also with three books still in print; and later Yale graduate and artist William Anderson Coffin (1855-n.d.) with two published books, one still in print. Lastly, Phoebe Ann Coffin Hannaford, (1829-1921) was one of the first women of the Universalist Church to become an ordained minister. Originally raised as a Quaker, she briefly became a Baptist before joining the Universalist Church.46

Mary’s younger cousin, Robert Tristram Coffin (1893-1955) Pulitzer Prize winning writer of poetry, Rhodes scholar and Bowdoin College English Professor, shared the Coffin reverence for school and education. Robert was so enamored of the rural brick schoolhouse of his youth that he purchased it “to preserve as a monument to my boyhood and the boyhood of America”47 In 1931, Robert published Portrait of an American, a biography about his father, an ordinary “all-round” man. In a letter to

---

Robert, Mary expressed her high regard for “multi dimensional people over the more famous but ‘neurotic geniuses’ and ‘single-minded zealots’ that biographers usually prefer.”

The Coffin cultural tradition, influenced by the Puritans, included the same respect for education and belief in hard work, perseverance and integrity. Both figured prominently in Dennett’s life and work. Just as the early settlers of Boscawen embraced religion and education as core values necessary to the well being of their society, the Puritans of Massachusetts, where Dennett spent much of her childhood, did the same. The impact of the Puritans was so pervasive that their legacy has continued throughout the centuries affecting all New Englanders whatever their origin.

The Puritan Influence

The Puritans of New England migrated from East Anglia, a traditional and stable portion of England located on the Eastern shore. East Anglia enjoyed the highest literacy rate in the British Isles and as “bible fundamentalists,” the clergy encouraged reading in order to learn from the scriptures. The Puritans believed that “to achieve nobility and attain salvation, man must transcend his physical surroundings by education, work, and great personal struggle.” They emphasized religion and order, both supported by a literate citizenry. Shortly after their arrival in Massachusetts they set-up a printing press, established schools and founded a college. Within a decade of their appearance in the new world, they launched two types of schools. Primary schools for the lower classes

48 Mary Ware Dennett, “Letter to cousin Robert Tristram Coffin” (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, January 21, 1932).


50 Ibid., 130.
consisted of dame schools and reading and writing schools. For the sons of the elite, the merchants and the clergy, they built Latin grammar schools.51

Building a printing press, emphasizing literacy and establishing schools all demonstrated their religious and cultural heritage. In 1635, the Puritans established the Boston Latin School “based on the belief that the only good things are the goods of the soul.” From the start, the Boston Latin School consistently encouraged its students to *dissent* with responsibility.52 Several generations of Coffin boys attended the school. The school still stands today as a testimony to the Puritan reverence for education and it remains the nation’s oldest public secondary school.

Referring to the Puritan influence of hard work, frugality and humility that characterized her New England childhood, Dennett described her background as New England Granite.53 In addition to incorporating their example of fortitude and responsibility, Dennett was influenced by their belief in education as a means of self-improvement. Dennett’s grandparents shared the pioneering spirit of earlier Coffin family members.

**Immediate Family**

**Grandparents**

In 1861 Dennett’s maternal grandparents, Elvira Coffin Ames (1819-1861) and Nathan Plummer Ames (1816-1880), left the relative comfort of the family homestead in


53 Mary Ware Dennett, “Re: Mary Ware Dennett, Biographical Notes” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folders 1, 9, ~1930).
Boscawen, New Hampshire, to participate in an experimental frontier community at West Creek in Lake County, Indiana.\(^54\) It appears that Mary’s grandparents may have looked to the ideals of the Utopian communities, popular in the late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) centuries for inspiration. Utopian communities grew for two main reasons: First, the quest for perfection and second, the desire to re-establish a homogenous, small town community within the context of industrialization and urbanization. Dennett’s involvement with the Arts and Crafts movement in the early twentieth century reflected similar anti-industrial views. People in the Utopian communities wanted greater control over their personal lives and the lives of their children.\(^55\) Elvira, however, did not live to carry out the plan.

**Parents: George Whitefield Ware and Livonia Coffin Ware**

Only one day after Elvira and Nathan Ames arrived at West Creek, Indiana, Elvira died, leaving Livonia, Dennett’s mother and the eldest of the four children, to tend the house and care for the younger children. At eighteen Livonia set aside her dream of attending Oberlin College, one of the first colleges to accept women, in order to care for her younger sisters Lucia and Clara and brother Charles Henry. Shortly thereafter, the community at West Creek failed and the family moved to Chicago where, Livonia met George Whitefield Ware (1834-1882) of Worcester, Massachusetts.\(^56\) In 1865, they married. Meanwhile, Livonia’s father, Nathan Ames, remarried and brought his new wife and remaining three children back east to Boston. No doubt, the family felt more at ease

---


in the familiar New England atmosphere where its citizens valued and respected self-
sufficiency and intellectual pursuits.\textsuperscript{57}

Dennett’s life was not filled with the kind of material privilege usually associated
with old New England families. She grew up during the Industrial Revolution, a time
when men like Carnegie, Vanderbilt, Morgan and Rockefeller built vast fortunes using
unscrupulous business practices. In 1840, fewer than 20 millionaires resided in the entire
United States, but by 1893, the Census Bureau reported that 9 percent of the families in
the country owned 71 percent of the wealth.\textsuperscript{58} Honest men of integrity like Dennett’s
father George, a wool merchant, had great difficulty surviving in the new industrial
age.\textsuperscript{59} The high moral and ethical standards that had served generations of blue-blooded
New Englanders so well no longer ensured success. According to Richard Hofstadter,
“The newly rich, the grandiosely or corruptly rich, the masters of great corporations”
surpassed the upper classes who were longtime tradesmen and small industrialists,
professionals and community leaders who represented an earlier time. With the rush of
new money, “the less affluent and aristocratic local gentry had almost no protection at
all.”\textsuperscript{60}

Dennett’s father and mother refused to conform to the unprincipled values of the
prevailing business culture and the family lived with the consequences of that choice.
George was repeatedly cheated out of money and the family lived an honorable and

\textsuperscript{57} Kimball, \textit{The Samuel Ames Family}, 1890, 37.


\textsuperscript{59} Rosen, \textit{Reproductive Health}, 2003, 71.

\textsuperscript{60} Hofstadter, \textit{Reform}, 1965, 137, 138.
highly principled life without the comforts of great wealth.\textsuperscript{61} They were not the only family members who disdained the luxuries and self-indulgence associated with enormous fortunes.

In an essay on luxury, Lucia Ames Mead, Dennett’s aunt, told about Colonial T.W. Higginson (1823-1911), Unitarian minister, radical abolitionist and fierce advocate for women’s suffrage, who could recall only one millionaire in the entire state of Massachusetts when he was a child. He remembered wondering what one man could do with such a vast sum. Aunt Lucia responded by saying, “Now we see men who count their millions by the score and whose annual income is enough to endow a university.” In the same essay, she agreed with a Boston writer who said millionaires were “the blight on America.”\textsuperscript{62}

Unfortunately, the health of Dennett’s father was of greater immediate concern than his failures in business. Dennett’s father George Ware died of cancer in 1882, leaving her mother Livonia Coffin Ware (1843-n.d.) to earn a living for herself and her three children. Once again, Livonia was precipitately responsible for the well being of three children. While Livonia took care of her siblings after her mother died, now she took sole responsibility for her own children. At the time of her father’s death Mary was ten years old, Clara five and William twelve.\textsuperscript{63} At first Livonia took in borders to earn money, but later she started a small business chaperoning well-bred young women on

\textsuperscript{61} Chen, Dennett, 1996, 9.

\textsuperscript{62} Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Introduction (Lincoln: University of Nebraska), www.higinson.uni.edu (accessed June 12, 2010); Lucia Ames Mead, To Whom Much is Given (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1899), 8.

\textsuperscript{63} Kimball, The Samual Ames Family, 1890, 38.
extended cultural tours throughout Europe. One tour included the Azores, the island of Madeira, Gibraltar, Algiers, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Naples and Italy’s hill towns. Reflecting the family’s deep commitment to art and education, a circular promoting the tour said, “More time is spent in Italy, since it is the source of modern civilization, the home of art, and historically and educationally more important than other countries.”

While Livonia was gone, Mary stayed with one of her aunts, usually Lucia. Although several members of Dennett’s family had a direct influence on her development as a reformer, in all probability Aunt Lucia played the most significant role. Dennett often stayed with Aunt Lucia and they developed a close bond. In addition to beloved aunt, Lucia served as Dennett’s mentor, role model and teacher, sharing many of the same core values.

**Aunt Lucia Ames Mead**

*When a woman loves the sparkle of a diamond just as she does the sparkle of a dewdrop, and would as lief as not have diamonds so common that her cook could wear them, the joy in them is surely genuine and innocent. We do not like sunshine nor flowers nor great poems nor music lessons, because they are within the reach of all.*

Lucia Ames Mead, 1899

Lucia Ames Mead (1856-1936) was probably the most intellectual of the three sisters, unquestionably the most accomplished, and the sister most invested in socially

---


65 Livonia Coffin Ware, “Spring and Summer Tour, 1911” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, 1911).

66 Ames Mead, *To Whom Much is Given*, 1899, 11.
responsible activities.\(^{67}\) (See Photo 1) Born in Boscawen, New Hampshire, Lucia moved with her family to a farm community in Indiana when she was five, the same year her mother Elvira died. After a brief stay in Chicago, Lucia moved with her sister Clara, brother Charles Henry (1847-1911) and father and stepmother back to Boston when she was fourteen. There, she developed a close relationship with her famous uncle Charles Carleton Coffin (1823-1896), abolitionist, war correspondent, engineer, historian and intellectual.\(^{68}\)

Lucia began her career as a piano teacher and then joined the lecture circuit, initially talking about poetry, literature and art. It was not until she became a political activist, however, lecturing on some of the most critical social topics of the day that she found her true niche in life. Lucia became a passionate reformer, a characteristic that was part of the Coffin family tradition. Under the tutelage of Uncle Charles and her brother, Lucia read extensively and developed the self-confidence and Independence that she later passed along to her niece, Mary.

Lucia’s grandfather, Thomas Coffin, was active in the temperance and abolitionist movements and her father, Nathan Ames an abolitionist, served in the Union Army as a

\(^{67}\) A scan of late nineteenth and early twentieth century periodicals, current published works and the papers of MWD show the abundant accomplishments of Dennett’s Aunt Lucia Ames Mead.

Colonel. Steeped in the tradition of antislavery from Coffin and New England influences and the transcendentalism of her childhood, Lucia blossomed into a zealous advocate for women’s rights, world peace and social justice.

Lucia began her reform work as an advocate for women’s suffrage serving as president of the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Organization. Mary later served as secretary of the same organization. Before the age of forty, Lucia published three books on topics that included education and literary and social topics that championed municipal reform and the settlement-house movement. She wrote a novel, *Memoires of a Millionaire*, in 1889 that expressed her wide range of reform concerns. The novel is about a teacher who contributes $30 million dollars to various reform activities, including public libraries, upgrading tenements, missionary work, social clubs for factory workers, lectures to support citizenship and programs to prevent delinquency. Lucia, however, is best known for her work in the world peace movement of the early twentieth century.

Combining feminism with her belief in world peace, Lucia supported a separate women’s peace organization so that women could have the opportunity to rise to leadership positions and get their voices heard. As national secretary of the Woman’s Peace Party, she wrote a report that justified her position. Lucia said that women who had reservations about creating a new organization soon realized that they held very few

---


“offices in the old societies” and that women had a particular point of view that added much to the discourse about peace.\textsuperscript{73}

Lucia also served as vice-president of the National Council for the Prevention of War, director of the American Peace Society, secretary of the American Committee of the League for Permanent Peace and chair of the peace committee of the American National Council, which was part of the International Council of Women for Peace.\textsuperscript{74}

Influenced and guided by Lucia, an “exceptionally able advocate,” the American Council began a comprehensive educational program about internationalism and the dangers of war. Additionally, Lucia recommended the launch of a supplemental education committee of the American Peace Society, geared towards reaching workingmen. In 1906, the committee she convened sought anti-war declarations from trade unions, began delivering anti-preparedness lectures and educating the public by disseminating peace literature.

As the build-up towards war escalated, anti-German sentiment burgeoned and pressure on the pacifists to cease their peace-making activities intensified. A pro-war stance became associated with patriotism and peace advocates associated with anti-Americanism. Most peace organizations and clergy did indeed surrender their convictions of peace to disassociate from those considered unpatriotic. Only a few remained firmly entrenched in the peace movement. Lucia Ames Mead, Edwin Mead and Jane Addams

\textsuperscript{73} Mary Louise Degen, \textit{The History of the Women's Peace Party} (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939), 52.

\textsuperscript{74} Kuehl, \textit{Notable American Women}, 1971, 521.
were among those stalwarts for peace who remained committed in spite of the
groundswell of Americans who supported the war.75

Lucia was able to blend several themes together and articulate her complex
views in plain language for all to understand. In a 1915 report to the Woman’s Peace
Party, she talked about democratic ideals, commercialism, peace and suffrage, all in one
easily understandable paragraph. She said:

Our organization begins its second year at a time when American ideals are in jeopardy and democracy is in peril. Militarism and commercialism are in the saddle as probably never before in our history. We are non-voters upholding an unpopular cause at a time when the policy of our country may decide the policy of the world for generations to come.76

In 1899, Aunt Lucia disputed basic Malthusian canon in an essay titled, Luxury. Thomas Malthus, British essayist and political economist of the emerging industrial-capitalist system, inspired the American eugenics movement. He criticized all forms of birth control because he wanted to maintain a low wage labor source for the growing number of industrial capitalists. He stated, “Prudential habits [i.e. birth control] with regard to marriage, carried to considerable extent among the laboring class of a country mainly dependent upon manufacturers and commerce, might injure it.”77

Coupled with his apprehension about a dwindling source of cheap labor, Malthus fretted about the inevitability of overpopulation, a major cause of poverty. Malthus’ philosophy helped the elite to associate natural disasters, wars and famine with

---


acceptable methods of population control. He rejected social welfare for the poor, believing that charity encouraged an increased demand for handouts.

In contrast, Lucia blamed man’s ignorance for poverty. She wrote metaphorically about the rich and the poor, using Dives and Lazarus to represent two extremes of the social spectrum. She laid the foundation for a condemnation of extravagance by saying:

Nothing could be more acceptable to Dives than the belief that with a clear conscience he could wash his hands of all responsibility for the woes of Lazarus, and see in pestilence, famine and poverty a wise, providential arrangement for the suppression of surplus population.78

Lucia went on to label as blasphemous the view that poverty was an act of God. Instead, she claimed “man’s ignorance, folly, and sin” caused poverty.79 While the eugenics movement did not officially begin in America until the American Breeders Association was established in 1906 and Harry Sharp did not perform the first eugenic sterilization until 1908, it is quite likely that debate on the subject of overpopulation and eugenics began earlier.80 It is also quite likely that Lucia remained adamantly opposed to selective breeding.

As a lifelong pacifist, Lucia protested against any form of militant action. She responded to a 1909 speech in Boston given by Emmeline Pankhurst, one of the militant founders of the English suffrage movement. Pankhurst called for “rough methods.” In response Mead said, “Let no one imagine that all the tremendous crowds, which Mrs.

78 Ames Mead, To Whom Much is Given (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1899), 7.
79 While conceding that Malthusian principles were not as popular as they were 100 years ago, Lucia stated, “…man is ever-ready to find excuses for self-indulgence. Ibid.
Pankhurst’s personality attracts, are in sympathy with throwing stones at statesmen and Ministers.\footnote{The New York Times, "Rebukes Mrs. Pankhurst," October 25, 1909.}

Lucia often spoke about the responsibility of educated women of leisure to give their time and consideration to assist with sorting out the social problems of the day. Civic duty was a popular topic at the lectures she gave to women’s clubs. In To Whom Much is Given she wrote:

\textit{Upon the privileged woman rests a heavy responsibility to do the special work that the time demands –the work of education of public sentiment; of scientific charity, of civic reform and of social and industrial reorganization.}\footnote{Ames Mead, \textit{To Whom Much is Given}, 1899, 29.}

Lucia Ames Mead, fiercely determined peace educator, died at the age of 80 in much the same way that she lived – in action. Riding the subway in New York and caught in a crowd of people, she fell on the platform, dying ten days later at her home in Massachusetts.\footnote{New York Times, "Mrs. Edwin Mead, 80, Peace Worker Dead," November 2, 1936.} At Lucia’s memorial service in 1937, Carrie Chapman Catt described her as:

\textit{One of the most valiant souls I have ever known. In the days long gone by, she was the best-informed woman in the United States on the subjects of war and peace. Now that so many are interested, where few cared at that time, Mrs. Mead has kept pace with the movement onward and has written, spoken and kept her contacts as bravely and persistently as ever. The world has lost a brave soul.}\footnote{Carrie Chapman Catt, "Remarks in Program at Lucia Ames Mead Memorial Meeting" (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, January 14, 1937).}

Others praised Lucia in equally glowing terms. In recommending Lucia as a lecturer, Jane Addams of Hull House observed the following:

\footnote{The New York Times, "Rebukes Mrs. Pankhurst," October 25, 1909.}
\footnote{Ames Mead, \textit{To Whom Much is Given}, 1899, 29.}
\footnote{New York Times, "Mrs. Edwin Mead, 80, Peace Worker Dead," November 2, 1936.}
\footnote{Carrie Chapman Catt, "Remarks in Program at Lucia Ames Mead Memorial Meeting" (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, January 14, 1937).}
There perhaps is no one in America who is more thoroughly informed on the various aspects of international arbitration, and at the same time so competent to present it to her fellow citizens than Mrs. Lucia Ames Mead. She is an easy and delightful speaker, and has the power of making even the bristling war statistics interesting and graphic of even an anti-peace audience, and would recommend her most highly. I have at various times seen her hold the closest attention.85

Mary remained close to Lucia throughout her life. On Mother’s Day in 1935, Mary and her sister Clara sent Aunt Lucia, who never had children of her own, the note below. It illustrates the close relationship that Mary shared with her aunt and it expresses the type of reserved affection and appreciation that she shared with those she loved.

To Aunt Lucia on Mother’s Day, for if ever anyone should have a posy then, it’s you, who have done for us far more than most parents can do for their kinder. And we do appreciate the mothering.86

Aunt Lucia was a noted scholar, reformer, philosopher and social critic who helped to transmit the Coffin family legacy of civic-minded political action to the next generation, that is, to Mary Ware Dennett.87 Lucia mentored Mary in much the same way that Uncle Charles had mentored Lucia. From Aunt Lucia, Dennett developed a steadfast dedication to the principles of freedom and democracy and an appreciation for the power of education.

85 Jane Adams, “To Clubs and Associations Desiring Speakers,” (Chicago: MWD Papers, Reel 1, April 10, 1911).

86 Mary Ware Dennett, “Letter to Aunt Lucia Ames Mead” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, May 5, 1935).

87 Lucia applied philosophical principles to her pragmatic efforts. She studied and based her “practical pacifism” on Kant’s Perpetual Peace. Lucia published her pacifist philosophy in Patriotism and the New Internationalism (1906), Swords and Ploughshares (1912), and Law or War (1928), She defined “patriotism, not as involved in making and using guns, but as serving the country as teacher, farmer, doctor, etc., a patriotism which should be embedded in the education of children.” Theresa Boon Dykeman, review of “America's First Women Philosophers: Transplanting Hegel, 1860-1925, by Dorothy G. Rogers,” Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society, A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy (Indiana University Press) 42, no. 1 (2006), 164-167.
Informed by these principles, Dennett worked tirelessly to advance individual rights, civil liberties and the free exchange of information and ideas. Publishing the Sex Side of Life was an extension of her belief in the importance of knowledge and information. Modeling Lucia’s wide range of interests, Dennett became active in a broad spectrum of reform activities. She echoed Lucia’s peaceful approach to reform, working to make birth control information and sex education available by reforming existing legislation. For the most part, Dennett avoided acts of civil disobedience. Dennett showed the same intractable commitment to her political principles as Lucia did, resigning from organizations that abandoned their core mission in favor of more fashionable positions.

Dennett learned from Lucia’s husband, Uncle Ned, as well. Edwin Doak Mead (1849-1937), Lucia’s husband of thirty-eight years, was a highly regarded advocate for social justice. He was an abolitionist, proponent of women’s rights and a world peace activist. Although not a member of the Coffin clan by birth, Edwin was part of Mary’s extended family and, as such, he too played a role in Mary’s development as a zealous reformer.

Uncle Edwin Mead

As the author of dozens of books and president of both the Free Religious Association and the Men’s Woman’s Suffrage League, Dennett’s Uncle Ned fit right into the Coffin culture of social responsibility. Edwin was a well-known Boston activist and the founder and editor of The New England Magazine, a journal “devoted

---

88 Chen describes Dennett’s training as deeply rooted in her family’s Puritan stock valuing “honesty, humility, intellectual rigor and justice.” Chen, Dennett, 1996, 5.

to the history, biography, literature, educational and general interests of the New England States and its People." Additionally, he served on the advisory boards for the *New England Quarterly* and Edwin Ginn’s International School of Peace. Its mission was to distribute peace literature to schools internationally, to teach young people “that true patriotism does not mean helping to support vast armies, but earnest work for the uplifting of mankind.”

**Great Uncle Charles Carleton Coffin**

"Uncle Charles was [a] great character in my childhood memories. I was soaked in his war reminiscences, as I heard them in his own home, and at the Lowell lectures with his “lantern slides.”...He was splendid in charades, and so was Louisa Alcott, who used to act with him, in the still earlier days...He was a wonderful old man. I am glad you [writer of story about juvenile classics] liked him too."

Great Uncle Charles played a significant role in shaping Dennett’s belief system, both directly and indirectly. He shared war stories with her at his home, suggesting that he also regaled Dennett with stories of her Coffin ancestors. Mary was extremely fond of Uncle Charles. He introduced her to games such as charades and to the stories of writers such as Louisa May Alcott. He took her to see her first Gilbert and Sullivan opera, HMS Pinafore, and Mary remembers how he “beamed over [her] with delight.” Uncle Charles hosted extravagant Christmas parties in his enormous four-

---


93 Mary Ware Dennett, “Letter to Walter Prichard Eastman, in response to newspaper article praising great uncle, Charles” (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, 1933).
story Boston brownstone at 81 Dartmouth Street in Boston’s tony Back Bay. Mary recalled struggling up the long flight of steep steps as a child. Although he and his wife Sally never had any children, their house was a favorite gathering place for all the nieces and nephews of the next generation.

Great Uncle Charles, the youngest of nine children, was born and raised in Boscawen where he distinguished himself at an early age with his voracious consumption of books. He read *Paradise Lost* before he was eleven and the essays in the *Federalist* by the time he turned fourteen. He was particularly interested in the history of the Pilgrims and the Revolutionary and Indian Wars. Great Uncle Charles returned to the village library repeatedly to read an account of Lewis and Clarke’s expeditions. His interest in land exploration and history continued throughout his life. Charles became a land surveyor, inventor, journalist, war correspondent, editor, lyceum speaker, world traveler and author of nineteen books.

Great Uncle Charles took an enthusiastic interest in education. His history books, written for children, conveyed a particular philosophical perspective. “His history series was projected to bring before the girls and boys the meaning of our country’s history; the philosophy of the government of the people, - its development and end.” He was a member of the education committee of the Massachusetts legislature where he worked on a bill that was the first of its kind in the world. The bill provided free textbooks to the schoolchildren of Massachusetts.

---


Charles spent a year and a half travelling the world on behalf of the Boston Journal. At the Social Science Conference in Belfast, he gave a well-received lecture on the common school movement. He was widely respected, not only for his vast accomplishments, but also for his vigor and bravery, sharing the Coffin ethos of fortitude and responsibility:

Mr. Coffin was an admirable example of what New England ancestry and New England training, and New England courage and energy can bring to pass for a poor boy, under narrow conditions and opportunities. His life is a word of cheer to every young person who proposes to make the most of himself and to accomplish something for which the world shall bless his memory.

Additionally, he served as a role model for Dennett’s interest in scholarship and world events.

First Years

Mary Coffin Ware Dennett was born in 1872, a time when Victorian values were intact and when the common school movement was thriving. From an early age, Dennett showed a precocious interest in social issues and an ability to develop and articulate clear arguments for reform. Although few specific details of Dennett’s first years remain, evidence suggests that she embraced central Coffin characteristics,

---


97 Ibid., 294, 295.
absorbing both implicit and explicit knowledge about her forebears. She retold stories about Captain Peter and Rebecca to her grandson, and in a letter to Cousin Robert Tristram, she wrote about another ancestor, her Great Aunt Mary Coffin.

*I was named for his [Great Uncle Charles] lovely sister Mary, whom I never saw, but I shall have to speed up mightily if I ever hope to become as lovely a person as she was, judging by the stories of her which have come down in the family.*

Both stories indicate that she had extensive knowledge about her Coffin ancestors.

Great Uncle Charles, Aunt Lucia and Uncle Ned all belonged to an intellectual and social milieu that included some of the most prominent scholars and reformers of the day. It is likely that Dennett benefited by their associations with Boston’s intellectual elite, often staying with Aunt Lucia and Uncle Ned and visiting with Great Uncle Charles. Lucia counted Jane Addams, Mary Wright Sewell and Emily Green Balch among her closest friends and she was well acquainted with John Dewey. As noted, Louisa May Alcott was a visitor at Great Uncle Charles’ home where Mary observed her aptitude for charades. Alcott lived at No. 20 Pinckney Street in Boston for several years, only a few doors down from Uncle Ned and Aunt Lucia at No. 30, making it likely that Lucia and Ned were connected to Alcott as well.

Aunt Lucia attended The Concord School of Philosophy and Literature, a summer institute located in the backyard of Bronson Alcott’s home in Concord. Bronson Alcott was Louisa May Alcott’s father. There, Lucia studied with “some of the most prominent

---

98 Mary Ware Dennett, “Letter to cousin Robert Tristram Coffin” (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, January 21,1932).

intellectual figures of the day,” transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, William James and William Torrey Harris. Evidence suggests that Uncle Ned also contributed to the cerebral atmosphere shared by Dennett. He corresponded with people such as Andrew Carnegie, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Harvard president, William Eliot.\footnote{Dykeman, review of “America's First Women Philosophers,” 1st edition, by Rogers, 2005, 2006, 164-167.}

Dennett was born into a family of strong and independent women. Her mother Livonia and two aunts Clara and Lucia were part of a small contingent of independent women in the mid nineteenth century who planned on remaining single. They preferred the relative freedom and independence afforded to single women rather than the restrictions associated with marriage. Clara was the only sister who actually remained single, earning a living as a teacher. Lucia rejected marriage until she was 42, at which time she married Edwin Mead, intellectual and compatriot in the world peace movement. Together, Edwin and Lucia lived on Pinckney Street in Boston, known for its noble bohemianism.\footnote{Swift, Literary Landmarks of Boston, 1903, 13, 14.}

The eldest sister, Mary’s mother, fell madly in love with George Whitfield Ware and they married and had four children: Mary, Clara Winifred Ware Hill and William Bradford Ware survived, while Richard died in infancy before Mary was two years old. In a letter to Dennett, her mother Livonia described her marriage to Dennett’s father as

\footnote{Andrew Carnegie, Oliver Wendell Holmes Charles William Eliot, Correspondence with Edwin Mead (MWD Papers, reel I, Various).}
well mated and she continued the letter by expressing her regret for leaving Mary in Lucia’s care and for her inability to articulate her love for Mary.

*I do not know how you have been so loving and kindhearted with such an ignoramus for a mother, who worst of all did not know how to express my love to you, and when I wanted to show it I claimed business and no time to, but often shedding tears in private because I was so unable to express my feelings and how I regret that you remained in Lucia’s care instead of mine though I never felt competent to treat you as I longed to.*

Livonia’s admitted lack of overt affection towards Mary corresponded with Dennett’s own childhood recollections. Dennett noted the Puritan influence of her childhood and the influence of her carefree father by describing her background as “New England Granite, lightened by a blessedly light-hearted father who died young.” Livonia agreed with Dennett’s assessment about her father’s role in her identity development. Livonia wrote Mary and said, “I understand as never before how you came to have the love incite [sic] you show in that little valuable book. It all came from your inheritance from your father. He had that core kind of love…”

Dennett continued her childhood memories by describing her early years as “a mixture of rebellion and beauty hunger.” Assessing her accomplishments, Dennett said she was “sort of a jack-of-all-trades.” Her main interest was “the art of living.” Of her childhood search for beauty when her family insisted on duty instead, Dennett wrote:

---

103 Livonia Cofin Ware, “Letter to Mary Coffin Ware Dennett” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folders 439-469, June, 1929).

104 Ibid.

105 Mary Ware Dennett, “Re: Mary Ware Dennett, Biographical Notes” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folders 1, 9, ~1930).
I was bursting with love and longing for beauty, and my elders handed me duty instead. It made me a rebel, at the same time that some of the enforced “culture” soaked in.  

In a 1932 letter to her cousin Robert Tristram Coffin Dennett said, “There was much in my New England background that made me a rebel, but your book has wondrously mellowed some of my resentments, - so again, I am grateful.”

Mother Livonia acknowledged the ill effects of Puritanism on Mary’s childhood, stating:

\[ I was made a hypocrite – although I was not \textit{one} at heart. \]
\[ The lifelong effect of that Puritan existence when I made myself become a Christian utterly, convinced me how I wish I had never heard anything about Puritan religion. \]

After attending public school, Dennett enrolled at Miss Capen’s School for Girls in Northampton Massachusetts. Its purpose was to “offer the best possible conditions for intellectual development, to teach right habits of living, and to strengthen character in the girls by making them self-reliant, well-adjusted members of the community.” The 1916 edition of \textit{A Handbook of American Private Schools} describes Miss Capen’s, located in Northampton Massachusetts, as “one of the best known preparatory schools for [Smith College].” In fact, Miss Capen’s School for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{106} Mary Ware Dennett, “Letter to Marie Stopes” (MWD Papers, Reel 11, `1930).
\item \textsuperscript{107} Mary Ware Dennett, “Letter to cousin Robert Tristram Coffin” (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, January 21,1932).
\item \textsuperscript{108} Livonia Cofin Ware, “Letter to Mary Coffin Ware Dennett” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folders 439-469, June, 1929).
\item \textsuperscript{109} Mary Coffin Ware Dennett, www.britanica.com (accessed June 23, 2010).
\item \textsuperscript{110} Janice Wilson, "The Pioneering Spirit of Miss Bessie Tilson Capen," \textit{Botanic Garden News} (Spring 2008), 5.6.
\item \textsuperscript{111} Hesperides, \textit{A Handbook of American Private Schools (1916)} (Hesperides Press, 2007) 162.
\end{itemize}
Girls was founded with the encouragement of Smith College’s President Seelye who wanted a preparatory school established to feed Smith College.\footnote{Wilson, "Miss Bessie Tilson Capen," 2008, 5,6.}

In what appears to be an autobiographical story, written by Dennett as a girl, she described “Little Mrs. Payton,” a young widow who was “almost discouraged” when she thought about the life she and her husband had shared before he died, in “their unpretentious, but very cozy little house in the suburbs.” Without him, it was going to be “difficult to make ends meet.”\footnote{Mary C. Ware, "Little Mrs. Payton" (MWD Papers, Reel 1, Undated fragment).} The unmistakable impression is that this young widow will somehow triumph over her adversity just as Mary’s mother did at the death of her husband. From her parent’s example, Dennett learned at an early age about frugality and that a good life could be lived without the benefit of great wealth.

As an adolescent Dennett showed a keen intelligence, an emergent reform spirit and a precocious understanding of the power and influence associated with class and privilege. She questioned many customs, for example, the tradition of burial, as new information and new needs surfaced. Dennett joined the national debate about cremation in a school paper she wrote when she was about 14 years old, \textasciitilde{}1887.\footnote{The cremation debate in America began in 1874 and continued to be an intensely controversial topic for the next twenty years. At the time of Lucia Ames Mead’s cremation in 1937, the practice had gained momentum and a measure of respectability. Stephen Prothero, \textit{Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 109.} For cremation to be accepted, she argued, powerful people must first adopt the practice and others will then follow. Dennett argued that:

\begin{quote}
There is no really good argument against it, [cremation]but there is that stubborn feeling that what has been must always be. In this enlightened age it is time that this sort of thing should be done away
\end{quote}
with. To have cremation become a general custom, it must be introduced by wealthy and influential people, and like many another reform, when it becomes the fashion, people will wonder why they did not adopt it sooner.  

One powerful person, Dennett’s aunt Lucia Ames Mead, did indeed adopt the practice. Aunt Lucia was cremated in 1937 at a time when the practice of cremation, although not fully accepted, had gained a measure of tolerance. The shared belief in cremation speaks to the intellectual bond between Dennett and her aunt and the influence Lucia and Mary had on each other. Dennett’s ability to develop and communicate a logical and convincing argument, such as her position advocating cremation was a skill that she used throughout her reform work.

In another paper, Dennett explored the cause and effect of the fast pace of life in the United States. Always conscious of the social hierarchy, she wrote about the rich young man who rushes like his father before him and has nothing to do but take care of the fortune his father left him, compared to the “workers who rush continually to earn their daily bread.” 116 Lucia expressed a similar disdain for the idle rich in Memoirs of a Millionaire. She lambasted several indolent young men for their lack of civic responsibility. Lucia believed that men of privilege had a responsibility to pass along opportunities to those in their community who were less fortunate than they were. 117

Dennett’s mother had to set aside her dream of attending Oberlin College, when her mother, Dennett’s grandmother, Elvira Coffin Ames died, leaving Livonia to tend the house and care for her younger sisters and brother. But Livonia saw to it that Mary was

---

115 Mary C. Ware, “Cremation” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, ~1887, grade 10).
116 Mary C. Ware, “The American Rush” ( MWD Papers, Reel 1, ~1894, grade 10).
117 True Ames, Memoirs of a Millionaire, 1889, 11.
able to pursue her interest in art. Dennett studied at the School of Design and Decoration at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Dennett also studied art abroad in 1897 where she discovered Guadamaciles, gilded cordovan leathers. Upon returning to Boston in 1898, she and her Sister Clara opened a cooperative handicraft shop where they both worked to revive the lost art of making Cordovan Gilded Leathers for wall hangings. In 1898, Dennett was able to combine her love of beauty and handicrafts with her progressive spirit to help organize the first Arts and Crafts Society in America, the Boston Society for Arts and Crafts. The Society opened its first gallery at Boston’s Twentieth Century Club Building, the same location as the 1937 memorial service of her aunt Lucia Ames Mead.

The theme of education provides a core framework for Dennett’s political and personal life. Her particular view of education, the free exchange of information and knowledge, informed her views on individual freedom, civil liberties and eugenics. Her belief in the unrestricted diffusion of knowledge informed her ability to share her personal views about sexuality with the public at large.

**Core Coffin Belief System**

Dennett did not develop her political philosophy or her proclivities for reform work in isolation. Her life-long commitment to social justice and to the purposeful actions necessary to achieve her goals were inspired by the intellectual and cultural heritage of her ancestors and immediate family, as well as to the Puritan legacy of New

---

118 Mary Ware Dennett, “Re: Mary Ware Dennett, Biographical Notes” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folders 1, 9, ~1930).

119 Eugenics is worth noting here because investigation suggests that Dennett’s view about education, i.e. information without judgment or state interference, informed her anti-eugenics position.
England where she spent most of her childhood. These influences affected her indirectly and directly and contributed to her motivation and ability to publish *The Sex Side of Life*.

The belief system that recurred in successive generations of Coffins included a pioneering spirit, fortitude and responsibility, frugality and generosity, a commitment to social responsibility, and a belief in the transformational power of knowledge through education. The Coffins acted on their belief system. They were abolitionists, peace activists, intellectuals and advocates for women’s suffrage. They believed in an informed citizenry and they supported the diffusion of knowledge. Generations of Coffins were informed by this core belief system, as was Dennett.

### Pioneering Spirit

The pioneering spirit of the Coffin family is demonstrated by Sir Richard Coffin’s travels from Normandy to England with William the Conqueror in 1066 and with Tristram Coffin’s travels from old England to New England in 1642. Dennett’s forbears in New England moved between Nantucket, Salisbury and Boscawen, while her grandparents Elvira and Nathan left the family farm in Boscawen, New Hampshire to settle at an experimental farm community in West Creek, Indiana. Dennett’s own pioneering spirit emerged in a metaphorical sense.

Dennett explored and participated in many of the most contentious reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With her publication of *The Sex Side of Life*, she pioneered a new paradigm for sex education, one that heralded sex as pleasurable and one that offered scientifically accurate information to children, without equivocation. It was the first book of its kind and it raised the ire of the postmaster general. When faced with prison for publishing *The Sex Side of Life* she
remained resolute. She refused to stop mailing it and she refused to pay the fine established by the court. Dennett said she would rather go to jail, “than pay a penny.”¹²⁰

**Fortitude and Responsibility**

Examples of Coffin fortitude and responsibility appear frequently throughout Coffin history. On his deathbed in Devonshire, England, Peter Coffin, (n.d.-1628) charged his son Tristram, the first Coffin to travel to America, with taking responsibility for his mother, younger brother, four little sisters and his business affairs.¹²¹ At the time, Tristram was only twenty-three years old, yet his father, Peter Coffin had faith in him. He was confident that Tristram would behave conscientiously by honoring his wishes. Peter said to Tristram:

> To you, Tristram, must she [mother] now look for counsel, and upon you, must she lean in a measure for protection, and I thank God that he has given me a son whom I can trust in my dying hours, to carry out my last wishes.¹²²

Evidence suggests that Tristram did indeed carry out his father’s wishes. Fourteen years later, in 1642, he travelled with his mother, wife, his own five children and his two remaining sisters to the new world where he began the American Coffin dynasty.¹²³

Joanna Thember, Tristram’s mother, was an exemplar of Coffin resilience. At the death of her husband, “although lonely and almost heart-broken in her last bereavement, yet not a murmur escaped her, only a sad look of resignation had settled upon her, as she quietly moved about the house, attending to her various duties.” Joanna exhibited the

---


¹²¹ Coffin, History of Boscawen, 1878, 491.

¹²² By One of Them, Trustrum, 1881, 8.

¹²³ Ibid., 1881, 9-11.
type of duty and responsibility that comes in large part from a deeply held belief in the will of God.\textsuperscript{124}

From her revolutionary war era ancestors, Captain Peter and Rebecca, Dennett learned about responsibility to the community at large. Rebecca’s ride through the forest, in spite of the likelihood that she was experiencing postpartum discomfort surely inspired Dennett’s resilience when she also faced difficult choices. Both Rebecca and Dennett had \textit{real stuff}.\textsuperscript{125}

With fortitude and grace, Dennett’s mother Livonia gave up her plan of college to care for her three siblings at the death of her mother Elvira.\textsuperscript{126} Similarly, when her husband George Ware died in 1883, she acted responsibly to support and care for her three children. No doubt, Livonia’s experience economizing during the vicissitudes of George’s business affairs helped to prepare her for the increased need of frugality after his death.

Infused with the Coffin qualities of fortitude and responsibility, Dennett was well prepared for the travails she faced in both her personal and political life.\textsuperscript{127} She showed strength and resolve when she published \textit{The Sex Side of Life}, and with her resignation

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 10, 11.

\textsuperscript{125} Reference to Dennett’s description of Rebecca as having \textit{real stuff} in a letter to Peter Vaughan Dennett. Mary Ware Dennett, “Notes to grandson, Peter Vaughan Dennett, on stationary from 24-30 29th St., formerly 82 Singer St. typewritten” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, undated); An extensive list of possible postpartum symptoms appears in the literature. Included are cramps, hemorrhoids, breast engorgement, fatigue, anemia, dizziness, bleeding, constipation, infection and pain or irritation, making Rebecca’s ride on horseback through the forest even more impressive. Lorraine Tulman and Jacqueline Fawcett, \textit{Women's Health Before and After Pregnancy} (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2003), 74.

\textsuperscript{126} Evidence suggests that Livonia showed fortitude and grace. Although no specific reference exists that indicates her response, she did in fact behave responsibly. Evidence shows that she maintained a close relationship with both sisters later in life, unlikely if Livonia was unduly resentful.
from the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts Society and the National American Suffrage Association. Growing up in a home where duty was favored above love and beauty, that sense of responsibility never left her.

Frugality and Generosity

But no man has the moral right to do many things for which the statute decrees no penalty. No one has a moral right to spend money, which represents human toil, for that which profiteth nothing, or profiteth less than it ought.¹²⁸

Several Coffin ancestors displayed generosity of both spirit and material goods. Lieutenant Thomas Coffin (1777-1853) donated generously to the Congregational Meeting House in Boscawen and Captain Peter and Rebecca were widely known for their generosity to new settlers, giving them food to sustain themselves. Levi Coffin shared his home and his table with fugitive slaves and he donated his life’s work to the abolition of slavery.

Dennett benefitted by the frugality she learned from her mother Livonia. After her divorce and without alimony or child support, Dennett was forced to support herself and her two children. She did so, by holding a variety of jobs, one of which required her to live in New York City. There, she lived in a walk-up that was so small, she could not fit two cots for her sons to sleep when they visited her. One son had to take a room at the YMCA across the street.

¹²⁷ Livonia Coffin Ware, “Letter to Mary Coffin Ware Dennett” (MWD Papers, Reel 21, Folder 433, June 18, 1929).

¹²⁸ Ames Mead, To Whom Much is Given, 1899,9.
Social Justice

Examples of Coffin ancestors and family members who influenced Dennett’s socially responsible belief system abound. Evidence suggests, however, that Aunt Lucia played the most significant role, establishing and shaping Dennett’s political and philosophical approach to social justice. It appears that Aunt Lucia’s contempt for Malthusian doctrine directly influenced Dennett’s conceptual framework towards birth control reform.

In the early twentieth century many birth control advocates embraced eugenics because of their fear of overpopulation by the “unfit” and “feeble-minded. Eugenics became a constant, even prevailing theme at birth control conferences.”\(^{129}\) Dennett, however, did not support eugenics and never resorted to using eugenics doctrine to support birth control. Although surrounded by eugenicists, her message remained firm, grounded in the belief that everyone had the right to know, to know about birth control, to know about sex, and then to make their own decision. Dennett framed her support for birth control devices and information as a fight for liberty, rather than a fight for social welfare. Therefore, her emphasis was on access to information rather than providing “goods and services.”\(^ {130}\)

In a position paper called *Birth Control, War and Population* Dennett showed concern for a resolution passed by the neo-Malthusian Society regarding their concerns about overpopulation. In the paper, Dennett demonstrated her devotion to the democratic principle of personal freedom and individual responsibility. She called state sponsored


birth control and sterilization “appalling paternalism, as well as a shockingly unthinkable intrusion upon private life” Instead, Dennett recommended that government educate the public about birth control in much the same way as they educate about crops and caring for farm animals, so that individuals could make informed decisions regarding their own reproduction. Dennett believed that to offer the public a chance to learn is an acceptable function of government, but insisting that certain people limit the number of children they may have is an outrage. She said, “Education and economic oppression are well worth worrying about in every country, but overpopulation is not.”

Dennett’s life was filled with many accomplishments of things she did, and one significant accomplishment related to something she did not do. Dennett did not embrace Eugenics, a movement that was extremely popular during the Progressive Era. Her interest in individual freedom seems particularly noteworthy in light of the widespread racism and natavistic beliefs that fueled subordination of the individual to an abstract ideal of the greater good. Surrounded by Eugenicists, her message remained unwavering. Like Aunt Lucia, Dennett discarded Malthusian principles in favor of a far more humanistic approach to reproduction. While Lucia called the fatalistic approach of the rich towards poverty “blasphemous,” Dennett called government intrusion into reproduction “preposterous.”

The Diffusion of Knowledge

*It is brains that more and more govern the world; and whether those brains be on the thrown or at the ballot box, they will soon make the owner’s sex a subordinate affair.*

131 Ibid., 95.

Aunt Lucia played a distinctive role in the peace movement of the early twentieth century, infusing her work with education and transcendental humanism, the philosophical foundation of her views on peace. Lucia defined patriotism not as making or using armaments “but as serving the country as teacher, farmer, doctor, etc., a patriotism which should be embedded in the education of children.” To promote peace she assembled education committees in peace organizations and she encouraged privileged women to accept their duty and responsibility to educate public sentiment. She believed that wars were based on irrational thought and she carried out a personal campaign to educate the public by lecturing extensively and writing at length about peace. Lucia was widely acknowledged as an educator and peace activist:

*She was the most representative figure in the peace movement to bridge the transition from practical applications to world harmony to that of modern techniques based on educational awareness calling for economic and social justice.*

She believed that “nations, like individuals, were capable of working in harmony. All that had to be done was provide the proper educational tools to get the job done.” To that end, Lucia wrote many pamphlets and books for children about internationalism and she addressed the way in which wars, patriotism and history were taught in school. At a peace conference in 1897, Lucia gave a talk where she beseeched the audience to allow children to learn about war “provided they are taught that it is the most savage and most foolish

method ever discovered for settling disputes.” Additionally Lucia supported education for African Americans and immigrants, serving as trustee for a school in Alabama for children of color.

Great Uncle Charles acknowledged the pivotal role played by the mind-builders [teachers] of Boscawen. He described education as central to the well being of the community and he wrote history books, predominantly to educate children. Mother Livonia emphasized the educational aspects of certain locations in her advertising for escorted trips to Europe and Dennett’s ancestors from Boscawen belonged to a community that embraced education. Cousin Robert Tristram immortalized the rural schoolhouse of his childhood.

Like her ancestors and relatives, Dennett had a thirst for knowledge and saw education as a vehicle for change and growth. In fact, Mary’s first job was teaching. After she completed her education at the prestigious School of Art and Design at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, James Macalester, the president of the Drexel Institute of Art, Science and Industry offered her a position. She accepted and in November 1894, at the age of 22, Mary began work. She earned a generous annual salary of $1,200 as an instructor in the Design and Decorative Art Department. The diffusion of knowledge was one of the core principles that informed Dennett’s politics of reform. She was a

---


135 Ibid., (accessed July 9, 2010).


137 Drexel President, "Appointment Letter to Dennett from Drexel" (MWD Papers, Reel 1, December 12, 1894).
determined supporter of the free exchange of information and her work for women’s suffrage, birth control and comprehensive sex education reflects that conceptual framework.\textsuperscript{138}

Summary

_We are not first of all Americans, we are, first of all, human beings; we are, first of all, God’s children all over the face of the earth._\textsuperscript{139}

Lucia Ames Mead, 1897

Dennett shared the Coffin family ethos, an ethos that made them leaders, reformers, intellectuals and prominent members of the community. From the time Tristram Coffin was appointed magistrate of the colony at Nantucket, they lived socially responsible and frugal lives and were generous with both their time and their goods.\textsuperscript{140} They believed in the transformational power of education and they supported the diffusion of knowledge. In pursuit of that knowledge, generations of Coffins travelled,

\textsuperscript{138} Dennett saw education as a panacea for the social ills of the Progressive era – a view common to reformers of that period.

\textsuperscript{139} Howlett, _Ames Mead_, 2010.

\textsuperscript{140} Davis Hallowell, _James and Lucretia Mott_, 1884, 20.
sought out new experiences and explored alternate and sometimes unpopular approaches to the affairs of the day. Many exhibited great courage and fortitude and a number of Dennett’s ancestors and family members led distinguished lives, thereby serving as role models for Dennett’s future reform work.

Dennett grew up surrounded by stories of her forebears who shared core Coffin characteristics. Her great uncle Charles and aunt Lucia served as direct links to Coffin family history, thereby providing her with an unbroken connection to the values of her ancestors. In turn, Dennett shared the Coffin legacy with the next generation.\textsuperscript{141} The \textit{Family Systems Theory} suggests that Dennett also absorbed specific Coffin traits by means of the multi generation transmission process, whereby the dynamics and culture of a family are passed along, across several generations. As Dennett reached adulthood, where she participated in the Arts and Crafts movement, she carried with her core Coffin traits that had served her ancestors and family so well for generations. They served Dennett equally well.

\textsuperscript{141} Mary Ware Dennett, “Notes to grandson, Peter Vaughan Dennett, on stationary from 24-30 29th St., formerly 82 Singer St.typewritten” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, n.d.).
CHAPTER III: ARTS AND CRAFTS AND DENNETT’S EMERGENCE AS A REFORMER

Introduction

Beauty is a living thing that cannot be produced by rule. It is the outcome of a free person’s pleasure in creation. ... two things are necessary for the production of beauty – responsibility and freedom.¹

Mare Ware Dennett, 1902

The political framework that guided Dennett’s ability to publish The Sex Side of Life appeared in public for the first time when she became active in the Arts and Crafts movement. Chapter Four contains a summary of the movement and a review of Dennett’s association with it, specifically related to her developing belief system concerning individual freedom, democracy and education. All three beliefs remained constant throughout her life and facilitated her capacity to distribute The Sex Side of Life.

The American Arts and Crafts movement became organized in the 1890s.² It was one of many reform groups characteristic of the Progressive era. The movement was a response to broad-based social, economic and aesthetic changes brought on by industrial capitalism. It began a few decades earlier in England as a reaction against what many called the soullessness and alienation of industrialization. It was not, however, a centralized organization, but rather a series of individuals and independent associations believing “that something was amiss in the modern, industrial world.”³ Instead of

¹ Dennett, Aesthetics, 1902, 29-47.
supporting the mass production of consumer goods, people in the Arts and Crafts movement embraced handcrafted items developed by the work of a single craftsman, often showing deliberate imperfections to accentuate its handmade quality. Emphasizing simplicity, function, honesty and a love of nature, the movement attracted many who felt alienated by the sweeping changes of modern life. Many felt nostalgic for pre-industrial times, a time they considered innocent and uncorrupted.4

John Ruskin (1819-1900) and William Morris (1834-1896) inspired the American Arts and Crafts movement, which was a movement that consisted of two primary strains of anti-modern sentiment.5 The first strain concerned social reform, that is, the fragmentation of labor caused by industrialization and the introduction of the factory system of producing consumer goods. The second strain involved the aesthetics of art and beauty. Whereas Ruskin and Morris approached Arts and crafts holistically, by addressing social reform as well as aesthetics, the American movement tended to bifurcate the two strains. Like the social reformers, the connoisseurs of art and beauty heralded handicrafts rather than machine made goods, but their anti-modern interest involved an almost religious fervor for the role art played in everyday life. For the connoisseurs, beauty was associated with the wellbeing and happiness of humanity.6

They believed in the dialectic between art and morality, both mutually reinforcing the other.\footnote{Boris, \textit{Art and Labor}, 1989, 11.}

As a young artist working with the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts, Dennett displayed her scholarly approach to reform work and her intense dedication to the principles in support of her views. She demonstrated with clarity the intellectual process leading to her final positions. Dennett clearly saw the two strains, aesthetics and ethics, of anti-modernist thought within the Arts and Crafts movement. With tenacity and a humanity characteristic of her future reform activities, she took a firm position based on her belief in individual freedom, democratic values and the diffusion of knowledge. Dennett was on the side of ethics.

\textbf{The Arts and Crafts Movement}

Essentially, The Arts and Crafts movement was about the division between art, work and humanity. In his 1853 publication \textit{The Stones of Venice}, Ruskin railed against the factory system that required workers to perform repetitive and mind dulling tasks on an assembly line. The factory system, he said, produced two distinct classes of people, those who thought and those who worked. One group consisted of gentlemen and the other of laborers. Instead, wrote Ruskin, thinkers should always work, workers should always think, and they should both be considered gentlemen. Ruskin viewed the factory system as morally and socially reprehensible and because the division of labor created so many disaffected workers, he feared a revolution. He idealized the guild system of
manufacturing goods by hand, characterizing the guild worker of medieval times as a hero who relished hard work and an uncomplicated life.  

William Morris, artist, philosopher and social critic, based his anti-modern approach to art, life and labor on Ruskin’s earlier work. In 1894, Morris wrote of his overriding passion in life, designing beautiful objects and his “hatred of modern civilization.” Like Ruskin, Morris was a proponent of the simple life. He defined art as the culmination of man’s joy in work and bemoaned modern civilization for depriving humanity of that pleasure. Morris railed against over organization in both socialist and capitalist versions of utopia. For Morris, the movement was about an idealized model for living as depicted in his 1890 utopian novel, News from Nowhere.

The story centers on William Guest, who is a Victorian man who wakes up in 2012 in a perfect socialist world. It is an agrarian society where life is simple, everyone is equal and all are content. In Morris’ perfect world, work is joyous and there is no division between life, art and work. Both Ruskin and Morris lamented the poor quality and over ornamentation of factory-produced merchandise. They sought to unify art and work in a way that translated into a joyous whole.

**Fragmentation: A Central Arts and Crafts Concept**

---


9 Ibid., 62.


13 “Fragmentation refers to the feeling that the work is divided into a series of unconnected tasks, not requiring the worker’s full attention.” Ken Browne, *An Introduction to Sociology*, 3 (Polity, 2005), 112.
The factory method of production replaced the artisan system of labor, and by 1845, master craftsmen and apprenticeships were virtually nonexistent. Both Ruskin and Morris viewed the end of the artisan system of production as deeply disturbing and problematic. According to Morris, the price paid by the individual and society for greater efficiency and availability of consumer goods due to mass production was unacceptable. Historian Sean Wilentz reinforced the significance of altering the artisan system of production. He said its demise was one of the most significant aspects of nineteenth century American capitalism by affecting the social hierarchy as well as middle class views about work, industry and humanity. Ruskin and Morris both addressed the resultant apprehension about fragmentation in related, although distinct terms.

Ruskin concentrated on the artisan’s fragmentation within himself between hand, head and heart. He believed that only the finest machine available, the human hand, could create fine art. Additionally, the whole man, said Ruskin, using his hands, his emotions and his intellect, was necessary to design and create fine art.

Ruskin defined manufactured goods as merchandise produced by mechanical means, with or without the use of machines. The manufacture of goods did not utilize intelligence or emotion, he explained. Only the mechanical use of the hand was required. When intelligence joined the hand to produce an item, without feelings or emotion,


Ruskin called it art. Finally, he applied the term “fine art” only to items produced by the complete artist using hand, head and heart.

Morris viewed fragmentation from a slightly different perspective.\textsuperscript{18} Rather than addressing the artisan’s internal fragmentation as Ruskin did, Morris addressed the artisan’s external fragmentation between himself, the consumer and the community. He provided three central arguments for condemning the factory model. First, assembly line workers usually finished only a portion of an item and did not experience the personal satisfaction of seeing a thing created from the beginning all the way through to completion. Second, the laborer did not have direct contact with consumers, thereby missing the pleasure of weaving his own satisfaction in the creation of an item with the anticipated pleasure of the customer. Third, the mass production of consumer goods removed the distinction of a community and individual personality on the product.

Essentially, Morris’ view concerning fragmentation addressed the detachment between workers and their products, workers and consumers and between communities, artisans and consumers.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Dennett and The Arts and Crafts Movement}

\textbf{Life and Art}

After graduating from Miss Capen’s School for Girls, Dennett chose to study art at the school of the Boston Museum of Fine Art (1891-1893) where she won several


\textsuperscript{19} Holbrook Jackson, \textit{William Morris, Craftsman-Socialist} (BiblioBazaar, 2009), 32, 33.
first place prizes for her tapestry and leatherwork.20 Upon completing school, Dennett continued her studies with Arthur Wesley Dow, painter, photographer and celebrated teacher of the Arts and Crafts movement.21 In Boston, before leaving for her position as head of the design department at the Drexel Institute in Philadelphia (1894-1897), Mary had become friendly with Hartley Dennett (1870-1936), a Mayflower baby from Saco Maine, a descendant of the Puritans who arrived in America on the Mayflower.22

Hartley was an architect who studied at Harvard under Charles Elliot Norton, later the first president of the Boston Society for Arts and Crafts. While Mary was working in Philadelphia, a lively correspondence arose between the two. Mary’s letters, initially beginning with the formal “Dear Mr. Dennett,” gradually evolved into the greeting, “My dear Hartley.” Their friendship slowly developed into a long distance romance followed by a secret engagement in 1896.23

Hartley had difficulty finding employment as an architect and he decided to continue his education by studying the great buildings of the Old World. Accompanied by his mother Annie O. Dennett, he left for a grand tour of Europe in February 1897. After much prompting from Hartley, Mary made plans to leave Drexel and join him after


21 Mary Ware Dennett, “Re: Mary Ware Dennett, Biographical Notes” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folders 1, 9, ~1930); Jessie J. Poesch Nancy E. Green, Arthur Wesley Dow and American Arts and Crafts (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1999).

22 Chen, Dennett, 1996, 23.

23 Ibid., 28, 38.
the school year ended. With her sister Clara, Dennett sailed for Europe in mid-June 1897 to be with Hartley and to study art.24

In Venice, Dennett discovered an old world type of wall hanging made from gilded cordovan leather called guadamaciles.25 She became enamored of the rich and lustrous leather that was sometimes stamped and sometimes embossed and painted.26

Dennett began to research everything she could find about the history and the process of creating guadamaciles. She found out that the Moors probably introduced cordovan leather to Spain sometime before the eleventh century and that the art died out before the beginning of the nineteenth century.27 Dennett bemoaned both the loss of the object and the process and knowledge that created it.28

After much study and experimenting
with different techniques, Dennett learned to craft guadamaciles of her own.\(^{29}\) She then taught the process to Clara and together, they attempted to resurrect the lost art.\(^{30}\) Although unable to earn a living as an artisan, Dennett achieved widespread recognition.\(^{31}\) She was well known for the beauty of her leather wall hangings and as an expert on the technique used to produce cordovan leather.

An interchange between Dennett and Gustav Stickley in which he appeared eager to receive information from Dennett about gilded leather illustrates the point. Between April and June of 1903, Dennett and Stickley corresponded several times about an article he was anxious for Dennett to write. The piece Dennett promised to write was about cordovan leather for *The Craftsman*. During a Boston meeting with Irene Sargent in late March 1903, Dennett had agreed to write it.\(^{32}\) Only a short time later, on April 11 of the same year, Stickley wrote Dennett to inquire when he would receive it.\(^{33}\) The article, which discussed the history and art of producing cordovan leather, appeared in the July 1903 issue of *The Craftsman*.\(^{34}\)

\(^{29}\) Chen, *Dennett*, 1996, 42, 43.

\(^{30}\) Dennett, *Biographical Notes*, ~1930.


\(^{33}\) “Can you at this writing tell me when you shall be able to fulfill this promise? Trusting that I shall be favored with an early reply and that we may have the pleasure of something from your pen, I am very truly yours, Gustav Stickley; Gustav Stickley, “Letter to Mary Ware Dennett Re: Craftsman article” (Syracuse: MWD Papers, Reel 9, Folder 179, April 11, 1903).

\(^{34}\) Dennett, “Gilded or Cordovan Leather, “ July 1903.
Returning home to Boston after her European trip, Dennett and Sister Clara opened a handicraft shop together to sell their leather and tapestry work. Dennett resumed her work with the budding Arts and Crafts movement and along with Hartley, Dennett helped to organize the first crafts show in the nation. With over 100 exhibitors and strong attendance, the show was a great success. A permanent organization was soon created – The Boston Society of Arts and Crafts, the first Arts and Crafts organization in the country. According to three sources – Dennett’s biographical notes, the Finding Aid for her archives at the Schlesinger Library and Chen’s biography about her – Dennett helped to organize the society in 1897, but that claim is not substantiated in other literature from and about the society. Nonetheless, it is clear that Dennett and her future husband Hartley played a prominent role in the early years of the BSAC. Dennett served on the society’s governing council and as the Artistic Director of the BSAC Handicraft Shop that opened in 1900. She was a member of the jury for crafts exhibitions and a contributor to the society’s newspaper, while Hartley served as the business manager for the Handicraft shop.

Dennett was not the first or only family member to embrace Arts and Crafts. Uncle Edwin Mead was included on the prospectus as a supporter for the 1897 exhibition.

---


37 Dennett’s exact words were, “Active in organizing the first Arts and Crafts Society in the U.S. (Boston)” Dennett, *Biographical Notes*, ~1930; The Finding Aid said, “MWD helped to organize the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts in 1897 and displayed her leather work in the society’s April 1899 exhibition” Schlesinger Library, “Dennett, Mary Ware, Finding Aid.” Chen wrote, “Before long, Mary and Hartley (future husband) found themselves active in organizing the Society of Arts and Crafts, the first of its kind in the country. Chen, *Dennett*, 1996, 43.

held by the BSAC. His wife Aunt Lucia wrote about the importance of linking the artisan’s life, art and work. She quoted Ruskin who said these three things were essential to ensure the long-term prosperity of the country. In addition to the laborer’s quality of life, the amount and integrity of the work must be considered. Whenever possible “his work must be made an element in his gaining not merely ‘a living’ but life, not merely bread and boots but skill, ingenuity, and perception of nature’s laws.”

Dennett combined her love of beauty as an artist, teacher, art connoisseur and head of the design department at the Drexel Institute with the Coffin ideal of social responsibility. She brought both sensibilities, humanitarian and artistic, to her work with the Arts and Crafts movement. She sought to combine the moral principles associated with the production of art with aesthetic considerations.

Intellectual Framework

As a social reformer, Dennett addressed fragmentation in much the same way that Morris and Ruskin did. She was critical of the factory model of production where tasks were isolated on an assembly line and factory owners mass-produced original designs created by artisans, selling them for less money than the originals. She believed that art could not exist in isolation because true art was part of the context in which the artist lived and worked. Factory goods, thought Dennett, were not art because the process of mass-producing goods lacked humanity. Without the laborer’s free will or ability to take pleasure in the creation of the product, the item was nothing more than a well-executed fake, a copy of the original handcrafted item for sale at a reduced rate.40 Manufacturers,

39 Ames Mead, *To Whom Much is Given*, 1899, 24.

concerned only with the final piece of merchandise, did not address process. Regarding the purportedly labor saving machinery that made some men rich and made other men drudges, Dennett asked, “Just whose labor does machinery save?”

Dennett idealized the personal satisfaction inherent in creating an entire product from start to finish. She said in order for art to flourish, it must have “fertile soil.” In a letter to Marie Stopes, friend and colleague in the birth control movement, Dennett explained what she meant by fertile soil: “Social justice and freedom” fertilize the earth and without fertile ground, art becomes “cramped and struggling or else is false and external.” Thus, Dennett sought to re-establish the importance of artistic integrity and pride in work, restore respect for the artisan, open doors of opportunity for women, and launch social reform.

Several women artists associated with the Arts and crafts movement achieved relative success in the early twentieth century. One example is Mary Catherine Knight, a former student of Dennett’s at Drexel and an accomplished metalworker. Knight served as manager of the BSAC Handicraft Shop that was established as a cooperative workshop in 1900. Dennett addressed the artisan’s quality of life, regarding his educational needs, individual freedom and democratic rights.

---

41 Ibid., 29.
42 Ibid., 29.
43 Mary Ware Dennett, “Letter to Marie Stopes” (New York: MWD Papers, Reel 14, Folder 291, October 21, 1921).
44 Pevsner, Pioneers of Modern Design, 1960, 32.
**Art and Ethics: Education, Democracy and Individual Freedom**

Dennett believed that life was about learning and without learning, there was no life. Essentially, she believed in the *dynamic side of life*, that is, to live is to learn.\(^{46}\) Thus, the associative learning or lack thereof taking place informally within the community and workplace was significant. Dennett lamented the impending loss of the kinds of art and beauty she associated with traditional craftsmanship. Her concerns were well founded. The growth of industrial capitalism and the mass production of factory goods had virtually replaced the apprenticeship/guild model of fabricating goods.\(^{47}\) The culture and economic conditions that fostered the transfer of knowledge and skill from the artisan to the apprentice were nearly gone, and Dennett was disturbed by the imminent loss of the artisan’s skill set.\(^{48}\) One example of Dennett’s concern for the loss of art and its method appears in her work with guadamaciles. She stated: “There is some hope to be had from the experiments of modern workers that it may yet be revivified and come to a real renascence [sic].”\(^{49}\)

Dennett was concerned about Arts and Crafts on three distinct levels. Her first concern was for the inevitable loss of the handcrafted art that she loved and secondly for humanitarian reasons – the loss of personal freedom and economic independence for the artisan. Lastly, Dennett was troubled by the loss of knowledge itself. She revered all

---

\(^{46}\) The notion of a constantly evolving life based on the dialectic between experience and learning is an idea that Dennett sought throughout her own life. As she matured, her outlook broadened to include associative learning experiences with other organizations.

\(^{47}\) Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 2004, 33, 126

\(^{48}\) Dennett, “Gilded or Cordovan Leather,” 1903, 258.

\(^{49}\) Revivify” is a term used by Dennett to describe the work of some contemporary artisans (herself and Clara) to bring back the lost art of guadamaciles, that is, gilded or cordovan leather. Dennett, “Gilded or Cordovan Leather,” 1903, 258.
forms of knowledge, believing in the transformational power of education. As such, Dennett found it difficult to accept the loss of any form of information or skill set. Her determination to “revivify” guadamaciles is an excellent example of her earnest respect for knowledge and information of all kinds.50

Dennett believed that art could only grow in an environment that nourished the artisan with an opportunity to learn, develop and expand his appreciation for beauty and experience leisure with his family.51 She recognized that the artisan on the assembly line had limited opportunities for learning either formally or informally because he performed repetitive and tedious tasks that dulled the mind and the senses. Factory protocol required the laborer to mindlessly follow directions to construct only one portion of a thing.52 The process became mechanical, that is, without thought or emotion.53

Because the mill operative had no agency on the assembly line, he had no opportunity to learn about making things better or more artistically, or by exploring new techniques. Thus, the laborer performed automatic and repetitive tasks day after day using only his hands. He was disengaged from his actions. The drudgery imposed by the factory system prevented any opportunity for him to learn anything more significant than how to perform his specific task faster and more efficiently.54 Without agency, the craftsman with an artist’s soul could not improve his product. He was forced to lead a

50 Ibid.
51 Dennett, Aesthetics, 1902.
52 Ibid.
53 Ruskin’s definition of mechanical is used, i.e. an activity without thought or emotion by man or machine is mechanical. Ruskin, The Two Paths, 2005, 25.
54 Ibid., 29-47.
static work life, performing monotonous tasks. For Dennett, a static life resembled a living death.55

Many reformers in the Arts and Crafts movement viewed education as the principal method to regenerate art and see it grow. Dr. Denman W. Ross, one of the organizers of the BSAC, suggested adding technical education to the existing school curriculum to unite technique with artistic vision.56 For others, education meant elevating the taste of the public through cultural awareness and the appreciation of fine art as opposed to machine made copies. Dennett did not agree with either view of education, because both were isolated from the economic realities of the craftsman.

Dennett was a sincere advocate for education and the diffusion of knowledge. She undoubtedly supported technical education and art appreciation. She did not, however, believe either method could satisfy the preeminent and much broader social and ethical problem of the Arts and Crafts movement, namely the artisan’s inability to earn a living wage.57 Neither educational approach addressed the systemic problems she associated with industrial capitalism.58 Dennett thought an artisan with a technical and artistic education would use that education to improve his income by turning his art into a

---

55 Refers to a letter from Dennett to Aunt Lucia in which she argued for a dynamic, rather than static life. She discussed how “institutionalizing the mind” has “stultified education…” Dennett ends by asking rhetorically, “We are bound to be external question marks, and when we stop – we die. Isn’t that it? How else can we keep alive?” Mary Ware Dennett, “Letter to Aunt Lucia Ames Mead” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, May 5, 1935).

56 Allen H. Eaton, "Handicrafts of New England," Handicraft (1949) 282; Dr. Ross explained his concept of “adding technical and artistic training to the curriculum [so that] we shall have the two elements of the artistic life, its fine impulse and its technical ability, united and acting together.” Dennett, “An Outlook,” 1903, 4.


58 Ibid., 13.
business, not exclusively for his art. For the artisan struggling to survive, income was understandably more important than art. Therefore, educating the artisan was not the solution for keeping the handicrafts alive.

The quality of education that Dennett believed could revive the Arts and Crafts was associated with democratic values and economic freedom for the artisan. To achieve financial independence, she advocated for a broad based education that addressed “the winning of character rather than information; the teaching of service rather than that of acquisition; the education that tends toward brotherhood and cooperation.” Dennett admitted to a critic that she wanted to see a paradigm shift in the nation’s industrial and social condition, but she did not offer a specific plan. Admittedly, economic justice alone could not produce art, explained Dennett, but at least it would make it possible for artists to pursue their craft.

Dennett looked forward to a future when the union between perfect democracy and perfect art might be possible. For Dennett, a perfect democracy included favorable economic conditions for the artisan. She believed that without economic independence,

---

59 Dennett wrote: “…The craftsman, being in a condition economically undesirable will, of choice, use any educational opportunities he may have, not for the betterment of his craftsmanship, but for the betterment of his economic condition.” Ibid.

60 Ibid., 12, 13.

61 Ibid., 13.


63 “Justice in economic conditions would, at least, clear the ground, so that art could grow without being choked by weeds and brambles.” Dennett, “An Outlook,” 1903, 13,14.

64 “There never has been either perfect democracy or perfect art, or anywhere near a perfect union of the two; that is for the future, but the sooner the conviction spreads that these two great things were meant to join hands, the sooner it will come.” Ibid.
the artisan had no freedom and without freedom, there could be no art. Similarly Dennett did not think an educated public, on its own, could revitalize the handicrafts, no matter how well schooled were the consumer’s tastes.\textsuperscript{65} An educated public might demand higher quality goods, but with that demand would also come higher prices. The artisans could not compete with the more affordable factory merchandise. They were in direct competition with mass produced goods.\textsuperscript{66}

Economic conditions forced many artisans to give up their craft in order to survive. Dennett suggested that people have in their home only those objects that they believed were useful or believed were beautiful, a concept developed by William Morris and quoted often in Arts and Crafts literature. Using that argument, she hoped that the public would eventually purchase fewer things. Perhaps then they would be able to afford the more expensive handcrafted items. With greater consumer support, the artisan would have a better chance to sustain himself economically while pursuing his craft.\textsuperscript{67} She did not, however, view the consumer’s purchasing habits as a permanent answer to securing the artisan a living wage.\textsuperscript{68}

Although Dennett was an artist and home decorator on a self-proclaimed search for beauty, she recognized that the artisan’s personal and economic liberty must be addressed before art could flourish.\textsuperscript{69} She agreed with Morris and Ruskin that it was

\textsuperscript{65} Dennett, “Aesthetics,” 1902, 38.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{67} Dennett, “An Outlook,” 1903.

\textsuperscript{68} Dennett, “Aesthetics.” 1902, 33.

\textsuperscript{69} Dennett, \textit{Biographical Notes}, ~1930; Boris, \textit{Art and Labor}, 1989, 176.
“irrational” and even “impossible” to think that art could thrive without first considering the material and practical condition of the artisan. Justice for the artist was the necessary context in which the revitalization of handicrafts could be achieved.\textsuperscript{70} She approached the artisan’s life experience holistically, seeking to merge the fragmented aspects of his being into the whole man of pre-industrial times. She addressed the artisan’s overall happiness including his body, mind, emotional wellbeing, spirituality and morality.\textsuperscript{71}

**Conflict Within the BSAC: A Principled Stance**

Other members of the BSAC emphasized the aesthetic nature of the movement. They wanted to see new art museums built, art programs added to school curriculum and additional Arts and Crafts societies established.\textsuperscript{72} Arthur Astor Carey (1857-1923) second president of the BSAC and Mary Ware Dennett led a small group of BSAC members who urged the society to place humanity above things, while the majority of its members were far more concerned with aesthetics.\textsuperscript{73} Dennett and Carey wanted to see the organization take a proactive and socially responsible position. For both, social responsibility meant taking a broad based humanistic view similar to the views of Ruskin and Morris. They were on a social mission guided by Christian values to create an environment in which the artisan could earn a living wage.\textsuperscript{74} With that purpose in

\textsuperscript{70} Dennett said, “To get the aesthetic result we must first have the ethical condition; in other words, art cannot grow unless its roots are in fertile soil, and its leaves spread in invigorating air.” Dennett, “Aesthetics,” 1902, 29.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{74} Boris, *Art and Labor*, 1989, 37.
mind, they established a cooperative workshop in 1900, including a store where artisans could produce and sell their handicrafts directly to the consumer. Dennett and Carey reasoned that without the “grasping middleman” the artisan would have a greater chance of earning enough of a profit to sustain his art and work.75

Meanwhile, on Hartley and Mary’s recommendation, Carey hired Frederick Allen Whiting, the only fulltime employee of the BSAC. He served as secretary to the society and supervisor of the shop. Whiting’s opinions held great sway. Together with H. Langford Warren, the third president, he wanted to see the shop earn a commission for the society, while Dennett and Carey only wanted to see it self-sufficient. To become profitable, Whiting encouraged the Society’s members to create popular and saleable items, an anathema to Carey and Dennett’s reverence for true art and the shop’s cooperative foundation.76

A dozen or more letters flew back and forth between Carey and Dennett from January 1903 through February 1904 in which they parsed the problems of the BSAC. Dennett wrote to Carey about her concerns, stating that making the shop a profit center contradicted the mission of the society.77 Carey wrote to Dennett about Whiting, describing him as weak and ineffectual and the wrong man for the job. He suggested they both resign from the society because they rejected the Society’s emphasis on things rather

75 Ibid., 38.

76 Ibid., 41.

77 Mary Ware Dennett, “Letter to Arthur Astor Carey” (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 7, Folder 139, August 2, 1903).
than humanity. Carey described the organization as operating on a “false principle.” The only good they could do was “to get out of it as quickly and emphatically as possible.”

In response, Dennett wrote about her responsibility to the society rather than the Society’s responsibility to her. She thought there was still more that she could contribute. Dennett wanted to remain a member until she was able to get every member the right to vote rather than keeping voting the exclusive right of master craftsman. She wrote, “… it would do me good to at least have a hand in that little stride towards democracy.

About a year after the shop opened, in April of 1901, Carey began a monthly publication called *Handicraft* in which members of the BSAC presented and debated the ideals of Ruskin, Morris and each other. In the May issue of 1901, Dennett wrote an article titled “Aesthetics and Ethics” in which she explained her views on the connection between art, education, moral behavior and the importance of financial viability for the artisan. It served as a position paper between the two factions within the society regarding its fundamental mission. In 1903, she wrote another position paper. This time she openly debated Dr. Ross who was the advocate for technical art education. Both articles displayed Dennett’s scholarly approach to social problems and her intense dedication to the principles supporting her views. She demonstrated with clarity the intellectual process leading to her final positions. Every recommendation was a principled recommendation, based on evidence, research and logic.

---

78 A. Arthur Carey, "Letter to Mary Ware Dennett," (MWD Papers, Folder 139, Reel 7, October 31, 1903).


In 1905, after years of conflict with Society members more concerned about influencing the public’s taste than in helping craftspeople become self-supporting, Dennett resigned from the society’s governing council.\textsuperscript{81} Dennett joined the Consumers’ League and the Single Tax League, organizations much more sympathetic to the needs of the artisan.\textsuperscript{82}

**Unit of Analysis: Artisan, Sweatshop, Factory Laborer or General Public**\textsuperscript{83}

At the turn of the century class conflict between labor and capital was on the rise and America was riddled with labor disputes. In an attempt to alleviate the conflict, labor unions grew, celebrating mutualism and the benefits of collective action. In 1898, there were 1,098 strikes and lockouts. In 1900, there were 1,839 and in 1901, the number soared to 3,012.\textsuperscript{84} (See Chart 1) The majority of late nineteenth and early twentieth century labor unions had no sympathy for the anti-

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{chart1.png}
\caption{Lockouts and Strikes}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{83} Dennett, *Aesthetics*, 1902, 29.

modernism of the Arts and Crafts movement. While labor leaders recognized the problems associated with industrialization, they also recognized the potential benefits to their members. Their program was simple. They worked to regulate industry and increase job security, decrease the number of hours in the workday and improve safety and working conditions. 

In contrast and despite the fact that labor unions across industries recognized the inevitability of industrial capitalism and organized for collective action, Dennett maintained her anti-industrial stance, firmly committed to the individual needs of the artisan. She framed her interest in The Arts and Crafts movement by addressing the question: How can art flourish? Her answer addressed the quality of life for the artisan, his individual freedom, civil liberties and his right to learn and develop his craft. Dennett was indeed a humanitarian, but it appears that her interest in art drove her compassion for the artisan. She filtered her ethical considerations for the artisan through her love of art and beautiful things, believing that in order for art to flourish, it needed fertile soil. Therefore, she reasoned, the artisan must have the opportunity to develop. Her statement that “The quickest way to get art is to get justice” illustrates how art was her objective and justice the necessary context in which art could grow.

Dennett did not offer a comprehensive economic plan to address the totalitarianism of industrial capitalism because she did not have one. She did have ideas and approaches, but it appears that between 1897 and 1905 when she worked with the


86 Dennett, “Re:Dennett, Biographical Notes,” –1930).

society she did not have a plan that she shared with the public.\(^88\) When addressing the type of system she would recommend, Dennett deferred to individuals that she said were more astute.\(^89\) Nor did Dennett address the system that created the assembly line or the laborer who was not an artist. Her unit of analysis centered on the individual artisan, not the factory laborer, the newly emerging consumer or the home-based pieceworker.

Dennett believed the Arts and Crafts movement was about the ethics of design and production. The movement offered craft shops as an “alternative to both the sweatshop and the factory system.”\(^90\) In some cases, however, the distinction between crafts shop and sweatshop was small or nonexistent and equally destructive to the worker. Unprincipled employers exploited the talents of urban immigrants, the rural poor and newly arriving farmers who flocked to the nation’s urban centers in search of a better life. Employers created a system of industrial homework, the most insidious method of labor exploitation, where sweated labor characterized the enterprise.\(^91\) Unscrupulous entrepreneurs preyed on the vulnerability of women and children. Motivated by the desire to earn excessive profits, they turned homes into factories where women and children labored for extended periods only to be paid little for their

---


\(^{89}\) Dennett used the concepts of Morris, Ruskin, Kropotkin, Tolstoy and Henry George to develop her political analysis of the Arts and Crafts. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 1994, 87. Dennett indicated that Prince Kropotkin’s “Field Factory and Workshop,” offered “wonderful suggestions.” Additionally, Dennett described the balance of work between the back, hand, head and heart recommended by Tolstoy. Dennett, “Aesthetics,” 1902, 46.


\(^{91}\) Ibid., 175.
effort.\textsuperscript{92} Industrial homework did not embody the somewhat idealistic notion of the craftsman ideal of a cottage industry. Dennett did not address the contradiction. Nor did she address the exploited workers who labored in home-based sweatshops where owners took advantage of the public’s interest in handcrafted products.\textsuperscript{93} Additionally Dennett did not address the potential benefits of industrialization for working and middle class families.

As newly affordable consumer goods flooded the market in unparalleled volume, many families had access to the kinds of merchandise that hitherto had been beyond their financial capacity.\textsuperscript{94} Yet, Dennett characterized consumers who purchased reproductions of fine art as victims of opportunistic manufactures. She said cunning entrepreneurs recognized a way to make a profit on imitations and targeted the unsuspecting consumer as “easy prey.”\textsuperscript{95} Dennett’s interest remained firmly entrenched within the narrow sphere of the craftsmen’s requirements to produce art. Her framework excluded the ordinary factory laborer, the pieceworker and the newly emerging consumer.

It is quite possible that Dennett’s own experiences and struggles as an artist led her to feel a special affinity for the individual artisan, to the exclusion of laborers who were not artists, sweatshop workers or consumers. Dennett wrote her two position

\begin{footnotes}
\item[92] Ibid.
\item[93] In the two position papers Dennett wrote while she worked with the BSAC, Arts and Crafts, “Aesthetics and Ethics” and “The Arts and Crafts,” An Outlook, she did not address homebased sweatshops or the potential benefits of industrial capitalism to the general public. However, in a talk she gave in 1909, her analysis matured and expanded to include more individuals. Ibid.
\item[94] Christen, ”Julia Hoffman,” 2008, 515.
\item[95] Dennett, “Aesthetics,” 1902, 31.
\end{footnotes}
papers for *Handicraft* in 1901 and 1903 at the age of 29 and 31 respectively. In “Aesthetics and Ethics” and “The Arts and Crafts, An Outlook,” Dennett restricted her concern for the economic needs of artisans alone. Six years later in 1909, Dennett gave a talk at the Deerfield Convention and demonstrated her expanding unit of analysis. At the age of 37, she had matured and offered a more sophisticated political perspective that was far more inclusive. Dennett talked about both the artisan and the factory worker as having “exactly the same disadvantage.” To help the artisan, said Dennett, “…we feel obliged to” assist all the other oppressed people as well. In the same address, she denounced special privilege of all kinds, including the tariff, public franchises, banking, and land monopolies.96 The Arts and Crafts movement was just the beginning of Dennett’s reform work.

**Summary**

Dennett’s work with the Arts and Crafts movement was the first of many reform organizations where she demonstrated her commitment to democracy, individual freedom and the diffusion of knowledge. As a disciplined reformer, Dennett wrote papers, gave lectures, engaged in discussions and corresponded with others about the theoretical foundations and approaches to the movement. She was well read, drawing from the works of Morris, Ruskin, Tolstoy, Prince Kropotkin and Henry George. Her resignation from the BSAC was the first of several confrontations in her career where political differences propelled her to leave an organization. Rather than compromise her principles, Dennett chose to resign after she had exhausted every opportunity to advance her belief system.

Although Dennett showed an undeniable naïveté and idealism about industrialization, her work with the Arts and Crafts movement also demonstrated a strong ethical framework that drove her reform activities. Later she expanded her focus to address the needs of a broader range of individuals. Dennett’s first appearance as a reformer showed her tenacity, strength and courage, characteristics that helped her to take strong political stands and cope with difficult personal circumstances in the future. Her commitment to individual freedom, so apparent in her Arts and Crafts work, surfaced in her personal life as well.
CHAPTER IV: THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

Introduction

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, differences between sexual ideology and actual behavior were common. Ambivalent attitudes towards male countenance and female purity versus sexual desire and fulfillment created an environment filled with a multitude of beliefs and practices. The radical notion that sex for pleasure was a legitimate activity challenged prevailing Victorian views that reproduction was the exclusive purpose for heterosexual sex. The range of attitudes towards sexuality during the years of Dennett’s marriage raises questions about how Dennett experienced her own sexual identity. It is not clear how Dennett viewed the role or significance of sexuality at the time of her marriage in 1900; however, she made her views quite clear in a letter written to her teenage son in 1915 when she wrote, “Sex is the very greatest physical and emotional pleasure there is in the world.”

Dennett described her marriage as a “gloriously happy existence” but it ended when her husband deserted her in 1909 for another woman. Left with two surviving children, Carleton and Devon, and no visible means of support, Dennett’s weak and

---

1 “The Personal is Political” refers to the name of an article written by Carol Hanisch. In it Hanisch defended against critics of consciousness-raising groups who said the groups were apolitical therapy sessions. Hanisch argued that women’s problems were systemic problems based on a gendered hierarchy with no individual solutions. Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political," in Notes From The Second Year, ed. Shulamith Firestone Anne Koedt (Schulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, 1970).


3 Strong, “Early Sex Education,” 1972, 133.

4 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to son, Carleton" (MWD Papers, Reel 1, January 10, 1915).
vulnerable position placed her in the center of early twentieth century sexual politics. Her husband’s self-absorbed behavior quite likely forced her to reconsider her views about love, sexuality and relationships. Chapter Four explores the impact of Dennett’s personal life on her politics. It contains an examination of the pivotal years of her personal life – courtship, marriage, children, scandal, divorce and the notoriety that followed.

**Courtship**

Mary met Hartley Dennett in Boston when they both worked with the Boston Society for Arts and Crafts. Mary then moved to Philadelphia in 1894 where she worked at Drexel and shared an apartment with her sister Clara. Together, they enjoyed city life, making new friends, participating in Drexel’s Drama Club, The Thespian Thirty, and going on weekend outings to New York City.6

Hartley was a romantic in love with love itself.7 He wrote to Mary daily while they lived apart, he in Boston and she in Philadelphia, expressing his enduring love for her and requesting assurance of her everlasting love for him. In his letters, Hartley frequently included overly sentimental and childlike love poems written for Mary. He signed his letters “Hart” and followed it with a heart shaped drawing.8

---

5 Mary Ware Dennett, “Letter to Marie Stopes” (New York: MWD Papers, Reel 14, Folder 291, October 21, 1921).
6 “Thesbian Thirty, Drexel Institute, May 6 and May 7, 1897, Program” (Philadelphia: MWD Papers, Reel 56, Folder 125, 1897); Chen, Dennett, 1996, 24.
7 Chen, 1996, 34, 37.
In contrast to Hartley’s romantic notions about love, Mary was more of a realist. She attempted to inject a restrained note into their romance by cautioning Hartley not to idealize her. After all, she was “just plain Mary Ware” she wrote. Dennett feared that when they saw each other again and Hartley was reunited with the real Mary, he “would come down with a thud.”

While Mary was gainfully employed and independent, Hartley tried in vain to find work. In an effort to stave off his depression about being unemployed, Hartley planned a grand tour of Europe with his mother, Annie O. Dennett. He sailed for Italy in February 1897. While Hartley was in Europe, Mary again wondered if his love was real or based on a mere chimera. She wrote, “Impossible, it can’t be true, I wouldn’t if I were he, it’s love he wants, - not me.” In mid-June of 1897, four months after Hartley left Boston, Mary joined him in Europe. The two were inseparable, spending all their time together. Hartley’s mother was extremely irritated with the amount of time they spent in each other’s company.

**Getting Married**

Mary was a confidant, accomplished and financially independent young woman at the time of her marriage in 1900. She was well grounded and practical. Having experienced the loss of her beloved father as a child, along with financial insecurity and extended separations from her mother, Dennett began her married life with an earnest

---


11 Ibid., 38. Mary Ware Dennett, "Undated Manuscript about her love life," (~1915) ,18.

12 Chen, *Dennett*, 1916, 41.
and pragmatic temperament. With three years of work behind her in a well-paid and
prestigious position at Drexel followed by a trip abroad to study art, Dennett
approached marriage with enthusiasm and an optimistic outlook. At 27, she was an
active and prominent member of the Arts and Crafts community in Boston where she
began to develop and refine her political philosophy. She was much loved and in love
with Hartley Dennett, an MIT and Harvard graduate. Many considered him an
“excellent catch.”

Hartley on the other hand, was financially dependent on his mother until shortly
before their wedding when his career as an architect finally began to advance. Hartley
was known as a sincere young man, handsome, charming, light-hearted and like Mary,
he was a progressive thinker in the Arts and Crafts movement. Together Mary and
Hartley were filled with great plans and an eagerness to fulfill them.

Mary’s mother Livonia was thrilled about her daughter’s plans to marry
Hartley, but Aunt Lucia had to overcome a number of initial concerns before she too
could rejoice in Mary’s impending marriage. Aunt Lucia feared that Mary might
jeopardize her career in favor of an institution that Mary had earlier expressed
reservations about. Aunt Lucia was concerned that her spirited niece might feel
restricted in marriage. Because Mary’s mother approved of Hartley and he hailed from

---

13 Livonia expressed regret about leaving Mary in Lucia’s care so often. Livonia Coffin Ware, “Letter to
Mary Coffin Ware Dennett” (MWD Papers, Reel 21, Folder 433, June 18, 1929).

14 Chen, Dennett, 1996, 32, 87

15 Ibid., 28.
an old New England family, Aunt Lucia ultimately welcomed him into the family as “one of our kind” with a similar way of life.16

Mary Coffin Ware and William Hartley Dennett know as Hartley, exchanged wedding vows on the dawn of a new century on January 20, 1900 in a small ceremony at Boston’s King’s Chapel.17 Originally established as an Anglican congregation in 1686, King’s Chapel evolved into a blend of Anglican liturgy and Unitarian Universalist principles by the time Mary and Hartley were married there.18 Hartley was a Unitarian, but even with his encouragement, Mary could not embrace a religion with artificial manmade rituals.19 Their wedding ceremony was traditional except for one small yet significant modification. Mary promised to love and honor Hartley, but she did not promise to obey him. Both Hartley and Mary shared a somewhat progressive view about marriage. Excluding the word “obey” was consistent with the Arts and Crafts ideal of personal freedom.20

Marriage

After the traditional wedding journey that included a visit with Katharine Ware Smith, Mary’s dear friend and roommate from Miss Capen’s, they settled into a small


17 Chen, Dennett, 1996, 45.

18 Hartley Dennett, “miscellaneous love poems,” 1996.

19 Katharine Ware Smith, “Direct examination at Hearing before F.W. Dallinger, Esq., in the matter of custody of children in the case of Dennett v. Dennett” (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 17, February 15, 1913), 37.

20 Chen, Dennett, 1996, 45. Mary and Hartley were not the first couple to omit the bride’s promise to obey. Robert Dale Owen, advocate for birth control and women’s rights, did the same with his wife in 1832. Jean V. Matthews, Women's Struggle for Equality, The First Phase, 1828-1876 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 12, 53. Elizabeth Cady Stanton did the same.
A short time later, Hartley’s cousin Ann left him a modest sum of money and they decided to use it to buy a farm in Framingham Massachusetts. It was a beautiful property that included a pond and a little house that they thought could be made serviceable for a few years until they could afford to build a more sizeable home. Both Mary and Hartley worked there every summer weekend of 1900, and with the assistance of a few neighborhood boys they created a modest yet functional summer home that gave them each a great deal of pleasure. They followed the Arts and Crafts ideal of a simple life lived in harmony with nature.

Mary and Hartley lived an active life as well. In addition to their involvement with the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts, they frequently attended lectures at the Green Acre Summer Institute in Eliot, Maine. During summer months on the lawns speckled with tents, they joined other American intellectuals to learn about world religions, world peace, suffrage and other compelling issues of the day. The Institute was a place where privileged Americans with time for leisure activities could socialize and explore the meaning of life and truth. It was similar to Bronson Alcott’s Concord School of Philosophy and literature where Aunt Lucia had studied in the mid-nineteenth century. Among the noted lecturers who spoke at Green Acre were Charlotte

---

21 Katharine Ware Smith was not related to Mary Ware Dennett. Smith, “Direct examination,” February 15, 1913; Chen, Dennett, 1996, 45.

22 Ibid., 46.

23 Mary’s distant cousin, Sarah Jane Farmer and three businessmen opened The Eliot Hotel at Green Acre in 1890. In 1894, the hotel was transformed into a summer institute for the comparative study of religions. Reflecting Farmer’s dedication to the Bahá’í Faith, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís took over the direct supervision of Green Acre in 1926. History: Green Acre Bahai School, Retreat and Conference Center, www.greenacre.org/ (accessed September 2, 2010); Chen, Dennett, 1996, 48.

Perkins Gillman, Mary’s art teacher Arthur Dow and Mary’s Aunt and Uncle, Lucia Ames Mead and Edwin Doak Mead. Even Mary lectured there about Arts and Crafts. Life was good for the Dennetts.\textsuperscript{25}

By mid-August 1900, only seven months after they were married, Mary found out she was pregnant.\textsuperscript{26} It appears that Mary did not know about her pregnancy until she was five months along, suggesting a lack of knowledge about reproduction and her own body. On December 23, 1900, just a month shy of their first wedding anniversary their first child Carleton was born. The delivery was long and almost fatal for Mary. In 1900 when the typical American lifespan was 47, between six and nine out of every 1000 women died during childbirth.\textsuperscript{27} Mary was so ill following the birth that she could not breastfeed, and a worried Hartley immediately consulted with doctors. Both parents were overjoyed with Carleton. They hired a baby nurse so that as Mary recuperated she could resume her work with the BSAC, write articles for \textit{Handicraft} and \textit{The Craftsman} and give lectures about the movement.\textsuperscript{28}

In addition to the Arts and Crafts movement, the couple was active in several other progressive reform organizations – The Free Trade League, the Anti-Imperialist League, the American Peace Society and the Single Tax League of Massachusetts. Mary was becoming interested in women’s suffrage as well. At the same time,

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{26} Chen, \textit{Dennett}, 1996, 49.
\item\textsuperscript{28} Chen, \textit{Dennett}, 1996, 49-51.
\end{itemize}
Hartley’s architectural business began to thrive and as they had planned, Mary worked with him to design and furnish the inside of the homes he built.\textsuperscript{29}

With money lent to them by Hartley’s mother Annie O. Dennett, they started work on their new home on the Framingham property. In May 1903, the Dennetts were surprised but delighted to find out Mary was pregnant again. By July 1903, the house was ready to plaster.\textsuperscript{30} Life was still good for the Dennetts.

In the middle years of their marriage, the Dennetts were known for the beauty of their home and the special relationship they shared with each other and with members of the community. Friend and social worker Ann Withington described the Dennett’s life and marriage during those years:

\begin{quote}
It was, I think, one of the most beautiful homes I have ever known, perhaps the most beautiful, relations not only of Mr. Dennett and Mrs. Dennett but their relations towards their friends and towards the community. It was, I think, to everyone who knew them a singularly blessed spot.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

After another “hideously difficult birth,” Appleton Dennett was born on December 11, 1903. Only three short weeks later, he died of starvation.\textsuperscript{32} At the turn of the century, approximately 10\% of all babies died within the first year of life and one out of five children died within five years of being born.\textsuperscript{33}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[31] Miss Ann Withington, “Direct Examination at the Hearing before F. W. Dallinger, Esq., in the matter of custody of children in the case of Dennett v. Dennett” (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 17, February 15, 1913), 47, 48.
\item[33] \textit{The Center for Disease Control, Achievements in Public Health}, (accessed 2010); McKenzie and Kotecki, \textit{An Introduction to Community Health}, 2007, 184.
\end{footnotes}
During this period, Mary corresponded regularly with Arthur A. Carey, second president of the BSAC regarding their mounting frustration and concern about the direction of the society. Their letters show a strong friendship growing between two like-minded individuals. With the news of Appleton’s death, Carey wrote Dennett a warmhearted letter that demonstrates the affection between them. Carey wrote “There is nothing to say excepting to send you my love, and to remind you of what you already know, that the little fellow is in good hands, and that you will meet and be with him some day.”34 The letter is but one illustration of the esteem and high regard that so many of Mary and Hartley’s friends had for the couple.

For Christmas 1904, Mary and Hartley sent out “greetings” to friends and family with a Phillips Brooks poem. Dr. Brooks was the Rector at Boston’s Trinity Church before he was named Bishop in 1891.35 The poem is a lovely mixture of hope and pragmatism. Brooks wrote about the miracle of the upcoming civilization, where struggle would still exist, but it would be a fair struggle.36

With no birth control available to her, Mary became pregnant for the third and final time in 1904.37 After another difficult delivery, the Dennett’s last baby, Devon, was born on May 12, 1905. Mary could not seem to recover this time and she was continuously ill for the next two years, until doctors accurately diagnosed the problem.

34 Arthur A. Carey, “Letter to Mary Ware Dennett” (Massachusetts: MWD Papers, Reel 7, Folder 139, January 1, 1904).


36 Dr. Phillips Brooks, “Christmas 1904” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 11, December 1904).

37 Although Tone provides evidence of a thriving black market in birth control at that time, it is clear the Dennetts were not privy to that information. Tone, “Black Market Birth Control,” 2000, 2.
Mary described her condition as that of a semi-invalid and she left home frequently for
doctor recommended rest cures.38 Hartley, missing her terribly, resumed writing overly
sentimental and childish love poems to her while she was away. One began, “Marimine
- This is just a billy doo to tell you how I lovvy yoo.”39 Hartley felt adrift without
Mary’s presence.40

Three doctors cautioned Mary and Hartley not to have any more children, but
none of them provided the slightest bit of information about birth control.41 Years later,
Dennett wrote to a friend about her marital relations: “We had never had anything like
normal relations having approximated almost complete abstinence in the endeavor to
space our babies.”42 Both Mary and Hartley were woefully ignorant about methods to
control conception other than abstinence. Under state and federal legislation, the
distribution of birth control information or devices was illegal and information about
ovulation, fertility and other reproductive facts was virtually unknown.43

The Beginning of the End

In the summer of 1904, Hartley accepted a commission to build a country home
for socialite and “noted beauty” Margaret Chase and her husband, Dr. Lincoln Chase.44

38 Dennett, Letter to Marie Stopes, October 31, 1921.

39 Chen, Dennett, 1996, 55, 57.

40 Ibid., 56, 57.

41 Dennett, Letter to Marie Stopes, October 31, 1921.

42 Ibid.

43 McKenzie, Community Health, 2007, 184; The Center for Disease Control (CDC) Achievements in

44 “Mrs. Margaret Chase, Noted Beauty, Defends ’Affinities,’” Washington Post, December 7, 1913;
Chen, Dennett, 1996, 57.
Whereas in the past, Mary and Hartley had worked together as partners on projects – he as architect, she as house decorator – Mary’s illness prevented them from working together on the Chase job. Margaret became more and more interested in the project over time, and her husband less so. With Mary ill and Dr. Chase too busy to be involved, Margaret and Hartley gained exclusive control over the project. Margaret would frequently visit the Dennett’s Framingham home where Hartley had an office. The two discussed plans for the Chase home and Margaret often stayed to lunch. Margaret and Hartley developed a close friendship.

In May of 1907, Mary left the Framingham house to undergo surgery in New York City. She was gone over three weeks and during her time away, Margaret stayed with Hartley and the children in Framingham. Margaret’s daughter Mary accompanied her mother. The day after Mary returned from the hospital, Margaret visited the Framingham house again without Mary’s invitation. It was a time when Mary said she did not want anyone there at all. Instead, Margaret stayed the entire day. That was the first time that it was entirely clear to Dennett that her whole life had been altered. She said in court, “Mr. Dennett was completely absorbed in her. That was the first time that I realized it.” According to Mary, Hartley’s behavior had completely changed, an absolute turnaround of his prior affection for her.

---

45 Mary Ware Dennett, “Deposition at Hearing before F. W. Dallinger, Esq., in the matter of custody of children in the case of Dennett v. Dennett” (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 17, February 15, 1913), 3, 4.

46 Ibid.

47 Chen, Dennett, 1996, 64.


49 Ibid., 4
During the winter of 1907 Mary and Hartley bought land contiguous to the Chase camp that Hartley had built for them in Alstead, New Hampshire. They all spent the summer of 1907 there. The plan was for Hartley to get a well-deserved rest and for Mary to continue recuperating from her long-term illness and recent surgery.

Instead, Hartley spent most of his time with Margaret, taking walks and going on picnics. Dr. Chase occasionally joined them, but most of the time, Hartley and Margaret went off alone on their daylong jaunts. Mary spent the majority of the summer by herself. Eventually, she spoke with Hartley about the unsuitable situation. Mary reported that he admitted to an “excited” and “abnormal state of mind” and that he was not himself. Finally Hartley said, “Mary, I have been a brute – Can you forgive me?” After more discussion, Hartley left for the Chase cabin to tell Margaret about his change of heart and that he had regained his senses.

Hours later Hartley returned to Mary with yet another change of mind. He now saw it “aright.” He told Mary that he was on the brink of a great new undertaking. He had a revelation about what his life should be and he needed Margaret’s assistance to realize the vision. He acknowledged that Mary would probably find it difficult at first, but that she too would see his vision in time.

The fall and winter of 1907-1908 found Hartley staying at the Chase home in Brookline an average of three days and nights per week. Hartley frequently took the children with him and as time went by, he did so in spite of Mary’s protests. Margaret visited the Framingham house less and less frequently. She wrote to Mary on March 5,

50 Ibid., 5,172.

51 Ibid.
1908 and according to Hartley, the letter Margaret wrote expressed his “ideas most magnificently.” Margaret began, “My dear Mary.” It included an admission that Margaret did indeed love Hartley intensely and earnestly and that Hartley loved her as well. In an effort to rationalize their relationship Margaret wrote:

> It is absolutely untrue that either wishes or has ever wished the other to be disloyal to any other person or to any other relation of his life. We believe that the gift of true love is a priceless treasure, - and a light not [sic] to be hidden, but to be shown. We know that this is the character of our love for each other, that it demands perfect expression, exactly as love for any other person or for any thing demands expression.\(^52\)

Mary offered to accompany Hartley on a two-week trip he was planning to Alstead in May 1908 but Hartley declined her offer. He said he would rather go alone. Additionally, he told Mary that if he wanted to have a child with Margaret that it was perfectly within his rights to do so. Only he could judge if it was “right or wrong.”\(^53\) That summer Hartley took Carleton to Alstead where they spent the entire summer without Mary.

**Scandal**

In February 1909, only nine years after they were married, Hartley proposed divorce and suggested they share the children, one for him and one for her. Mary declined the suggestion.\(^54\) Two months later in April 1909, following years of emotional turmoil and financial strain, Hartley left the magnificent home he and Mary

---

\(^52\) Margaret Chase, "Letter from Margaret Chase to Mary Ware Dennett, March 5, 1908" (MWD Papers, Reel 2, Folder 18, March 5, 1908).

\(^53\) Mary Ware Dennett, “Statement at Hearing before F.W. Dallinger, Esq., in the matter of custody of children in the case of Dennett v. Dennett” (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 17, February 15-21, 1913), 173.

\(^54\) Chen, *Dennett*, 1996, 87, 92, 93,
built together and moved into his brother Vaughn’s shop.\textsuperscript{55} The shop was a short walk from the Dennett home and Margaret frequently visited him there, often spending the night.\textsuperscript{56} At the same time that Hartley was spending most of his time with Margaret, he continued to profess his love for Mary and claimed his love was as strong as ever.\textsuperscript{57} Hartley professed his love for Margaret was spiritual and that although he loved Mrs. Chase more; his love for his wife was no less.\textsuperscript{58}

Hartley called Margaret his “soul mate” and the newspapers repeatedly used the phrase to sensationalize the already scandalous affair. Even after Margaret developed her “intellectual friendship” with Hartley, Dr. Chase was able to accept her on the only terms that Margaret allowed – sharing her with another man. Dr. Chase was so besotted with his wife that he even helped to support Hartley and Margaret. Newspaper reports indicated that Hartley was reliant to a large degree upon the generosity of Margaret’s husband.\textsuperscript{59} Dr. Chase accused Mary of attempting to monopolize Hartley’s love, simply because she was married to him.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{55} Mary Ware Dennett, "Cross Examination at Hearing before F.W. Dallinger, Esq., in the matter of custody of children in the case of Dennett v. Dennett" (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 17, February 15-21, 1913), 29.

\textsuperscript{56} Dr. Lincoln Chase, "Direct Examination at Hearing before F.W. Dallinger, Esq., in the matter of custody of children in the case of Dennett v. Dennett" (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 17, February 15-21, 1913), 127; Hartley Dennett, "Examination at Custody hearing at probate court" (East Cambridge: MWD Papers, Reel 2, Folder 18, September 22, 1909), 14.

\textsuperscript{57} Ware Smith, “Direct Examination,” 1913, 37, 38.

\textsuperscript{58} "Defence of His Love, His Divorce Answer," \textit{Boston Post} (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 2, Folder 20, 1913).

\textsuperscript{59} “Startling Triangular Life Sanctioned by This Man,” \textit{Washington Post}, December 7, 1913.

\textsuperscript{60} "Defence of His Love," 1915.
In a Washington Post story that noted a visit to see her husband for a few weeks, Margaret was described as “cultured, brilliant, womanly, and the ‘spiritual comrade’ of Hartley Dennett.” Dr. Chase portrayed his wife of eighteen years as a unique woman who was a continuous source of enlightenment and joy.61 In another story, Chase described Margaret as “wise, womanly and wild.”62 The scandal was escalated when Margaret’s husband, Dr. Chase resigned from the Brookline Board of Health to establish his permanent residence at the Alstead farm with Hartley and Margaret as part of the “soul mate triangle,” where the teachings of Christ, Tolstoy and Emerson were to be followed.63

Divorce

In February of 1913, after years of disagreement, struggle and public scandal, divorce was granted to Mary on the grounds of desertion.64 Hartley was again ordered to provide childcare for the two boys, which he never did, forcing Mary to struggle financially for the rest of her life.65 In the years that followed Dennett’s separation and


65 Ibid.
divorce from Hartley, she supported herself and the boys by earning a modest salary as an employee of several reform organizations.

Divorce was on the rise in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries along with the proliferation of pornography, venereal diseases, prostitution and the increased consumption of alcohol. Purity crusaders were troubled by the rise of “vice” and worked to reduce its growth. Anthony Comstock of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice worked to eradicate pornography, birth control and public displays of sexuality. Frances Willard and Carrie Nation of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union pressed for more restrictive liquor laws and anti-alcohol education in schools.

Table 1 shows the trend of rising divorce rates between 1880 and 1916. Social conservatives such as Anna B. Rogers were alarmed by the increased rate of divorce because they believed divorce threatened the sanctity of marriage, the “foundation of society and civilization.”

Table 1: Divorce Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Marriages Per Divorce</th>
<th>Divorce Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


67 Ibid., 52, 87.

Rogers blamed widespread selfishness specifically on the part of women for the rise. In her 1909 book, she stated that the responsibility for a marriage’s success resided with the woman and that women had lost the art of giving. She blamed the “lovers of individualism” for looking to divorce as the enlightened answer to personal happiness. Rogers wrote that divorce must be examined within the context of the family’s welfare and the role it played in maintaining the existing social order. But others, primarily feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, supported divorce because it offered women important freedoms within marriage.

Dennett’s views about divorce are unclear. The evidence suggests that neither an exaggerated individualism nor her feminist politics caused her divorce. Her commitment to individual freedom is well documented, but it would be incorrect to characterize her as a selfish individualist or that her selfishness caused the divorce. She loved Hartley deeply and unselfishly, and even attempted to accept his love for another woman, while maintaining a poor semblance of their prior relationship. Hartley indicated his willingness to have Mary join the family and be part of the household from time to time, “as the circumstances came about, just as previously.” Propelled into a situation not of her making, Dennett’s only choice, other than joining the Chase/Hartley household was divorce.

---


Hartley, on the other hand, was extremely self-centered. He told Mary that there were times when he and Margaret needed to be alone, that her presence was sometimes intrusive and if he chose, he had the right to have a child with Margaret. At the time, Hartley wanted to retain the affection of both women concurrently. After a temporary order for exclusive custody of the children was given to Mary in 1909, Hartley retaliated by denying financial responsibility for family bills. The custody hearing went to probate court on September 22, 1909 where Mary was awarded permanent custody. The judge ordered Hartley to pay child support a second time. Hartley refused to pay it because without custody of at least one of the boys he considered it “taxation without representation.” He equated it with “slave labor.” In today’s vernacular Hartley would probably be described as a narcissist.

Active in both the suffrage and the birth control movements, it is certainly accurate to describe Dennett as a feminist. It is also quite likely that she supported liberalizing divorce laws so that women would not be forced to live in abusive or unhappy marriages. But, it is also clear that she only reluctantly divorced Hartley and did not feel entirely comfortable with her status as a divorced woman. In her later work with the suffrage and birth control movements, she worried that her infamy as a divorced woman

72 Mary Ware Dennett, "Statement at Hearing before F.W. Dallinger, Esq., in the matter of custody of children in the case of Dennett v. Dennett" (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 17, February 15-21, 1913), 173.

73 Mary Ware Dennett, "Testimony at Hearing before F.W. Esq., in the matter of custody of children in the case of Dennett v. Dennett" (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 17, February 15-21, 1913), 24, 25.

74 Chen, Dennett, 1996, 95, 97, 99.

75 Katharine Ware Smith, "Cross examination at Hearing before F.W. Dallinger, Esq., in the matter of custody of children in the case of Dennett v. Dennett" (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 17, February 15-21, 1913), 54.
woman would have an adverse affect on the causes she so passionately endorsed. She preferred to work behind the scenes.

**The Children: Carleton and Devon**

After her separation and divorce, Dennett’s work required her to live in New York and Washington and to travel extensively. For that reason, Carleton and Devon were enrolled in The Danforth School, a boarding school for boys. She wrote to her sons regularly and the collections of letters that remain offer a rare glimpse into the heart and politics of a public figure. Each letter contains a vivid and heartfelt description of the work Dennett was doing at the time, poses questions to her sons about their lives, and offers words of love and affection to them. See Illustration 3 for a sample letter Dennett wrote to her sons in 1913 about a suffrage parade in Washington DC. It includes a drawing of Dennett holding a banner and leading a delegation of women marching to the capital. On the left is an actual picture of the parade. Dennett wrote another letter to Carleton in the same year that reflects the kind of love and devotion she felt and often expressed to her sons. (See Illustration 3)

The letters suggest that leaving her beloved boys was a wrenching experience for Dennett, but the need to earn a living forced her to make that choice. For Dennett, sharing custody with Hartley was not an option. She did not believe that Hartley and Margaret could provide a suitable home for the boys.

---

76 Dr. Frank Patch, "Direct Examination at Hearing before F. W. Dallinger, Esq., in the matter of custody of children in the case of Dennett v. Dennett" (Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 2, Folder 17, February 15-21, 1913), 13.

Although Dennett did not speak ill of Hartley, the same was not true for him. Hartley told the boys that Dennett was trying to have him arrested and thrown in jail. Carleton, a sensitive and gentle soul, was deeply upset by the accusation. In truth, Mary was attempting to get Hartley to contribute to the cost of raising the children. Hartley refused, saying it was unreasonable for him to contribute funds to raise them when he did not have custody. He continuously pressed for guardianship of one boy.

Illustration 3: Suffrage Parade, DC, 1913

You are a dear comfort, sonny boy, and I want you to know that I know it, and love you more than ever. To feel sure that you are growing up fine and straight and true is all the happiness I will need. Every time I see you help Devon along, I know that my own work is amounting to something, after all.

Illustration 3: Suffrage Parade, DC, 1913  


Summary

Because of the scandal surrounding her separation and divorce, Dennett was unwittingly propelled from the relative anonymity of the reproductive sphere into the glare of public life and opinion.⁸⁰ Dennett’s divorce and custody trials were not her first experiences under the watchful eye of the public. By the time the circumstances of her divorce became a public scandal, she had delivered several lectures about Arts and Crafts and publicly canvassed for suffrage. It was, however, her first brush with notoriety concerning the intimate details of her marriage and personal relationships.

In spite of Dennett’s aversion to personal publicity, she exhibited strength, courage, and integrity as she uncompromising fought for exclusive custody of her children.⁸¹ As a circumspect New Englander, Dennett did not enjoy the notoriety she engendered or the intrusion into her personal affairs. It must have been a terribly humiliating experience for Dennett to have her husband publicly admit his love for another woman. Following Hartley’s abandonment, Dennett experienced such deep feelings of despair that she later expressed her gratitude that she had blocked out the worst portions of the ordeal.⁸²

Nonetheless, Dennett refused to acquiesce to Hartley’s suggestion to separate and share the children. She did not attempt to negotiate any sort of private agreement or compromise that might have avoided public scrutiny and censor. Dennett refused alimony

---

⁸⁰ Although Dennett had earned a living at Drexel for three years, worked with the BSAC and gave lectures about the Arts and Crafts movement, she was primarily a wife and mother at the time of Hartley’s desertion.


or personal gifts of money from Hartley, believing that he had a family responsibility to help support the children without the quid pro quo of shared custody.83 She viewed personal gifts from Hartley as inappropriate to the situation and her fierce independence precluded her desire for alimony.

Public opinion about divorce and the role of women in the early twentieth century indicate that social conservatives such as Rogers believed women were usually at fault in cases of divorce. Mary’s attorney Mr. Merriam attempted to establish her innocence by creating an image of Dennett as a traditional woman. In his direct examination, Merriam began by questioning Dennett about the dates of her marriage and the birth of her three children. He quickly moved on to asking about her activities before the separation: “Prior to that time were you engaged in the usual occupations in the home of wife and mother?”84 Dennett answered “yes” and explained that she also did professional work in home decorating. Merriam then asked if those activities interfered with her “domestic duties as wife and mother?” Dennett answered “no” because she controlled her own time.85

Later in the hearing Merriam called Dr. Patch, President of the Massachusetts and National Homeopathic Societies and Professor at Boston University’s School of Medicine as a character witness for Mary. Merriam asked Dr. Patch if she was a good mother, a “womanly woman” and a “domestic women.” Patch answered “thoroughly

---

83 Hartley Dennett, "Direct Examination,” 1913, 178.
84 Dennett, “Direct Examination at Hearing,” 1913, 2.
85 Ibid., 3.
so.86 Judgments about the role of women in the early twentieth century suggest the real question was about Dennett’s femininity. Mr. Merriam was using the testimony of a highly respected member of the community, a medical doctor, to assert that Dennett executed her duties as a wife and mother successfully, and was not to blame for Hartley’s desertion.87 Dennett’s virtue as a woman was on trial.

Many of Dennett’s reform activities mirrored experiences from her personal life. For example, she was one of the founders of the Twilight Sleep Association, an organization dedicated to painless childbirth.88 Later, she became a leader in the birth control movement and an advocate for comprehensive sex education. For Dennett, the personal was indeed, political. In the next chapter, Dennett’s reform work is examined and additional connections between her personal and political life surface.

86 Dr. Patch, “Direct Examination at Hearing,” 1913, 13.

87 Mr. Merriam, "Direct Examination of Dr. Patch at the Hearing before F. W. Dallinger, Esq., in the matter of custody of children in Dennett v. Dennett" (MWD Papers, Reel 2, Folder 17, February 15-21, 1913), 13.

CHAPTER V: THE POLITICAL IS PERSONAL

Introduction

In 1912, a friend and colleague of Dennett’s in Heterodoxy described her as not just a feminist, but also a single taxer with strong socialist tendencies.1 Alice Stone Blackwell, an associate of Dennett’s in the suffrage movement, referred to her as “a woman with good sense, discretion and a sweet temper.”2 Dennett, however, was much more accomplished than either of those descriptions suggest. Beyond her involvement with economic democracy and suffrage was her interest in women’s rights and international peace. Her development as a social activist took her further and further away from the traditional role she had played while married to Hartley. In each organization, Dennett developed new skills and abilities that made her a more confident and valuable resource in her subsequent reform work.

Dennett’s trajectory from the reproductive sphere into the productive sphere of influence was not an isolated occurrence solely motivated by personal need. She was part of a much larger historical trend that began when the growing numbers of new women participated in one or more of the many social reform organizations

---


characteristic of the Progressive Era. In these organizations, Dennett and other women learned the managerial, political and legislative skills that helped them to succeed in the public sphere.

One reason for the larger numbers of new women was the sharp rise of college-educated females between 1880 and 1920. More women were prepared for college because of the rise in literacy rates, and more women were literate because of the common school movement. By the end of the twentieth century, virtually every

---

3 Historians use the term new woman in several ways – to describe athletic, bicycle riding and educated women, as a pejorative to denote masculine women and/or lesbians and in very broad terms that include those who chafed under the limitations of the “Cult of True Womanhood.” The new woman expanded the boundaries imposed by gender in terms of her work, leisure activities, education, clothing and sexuality. This research uses the broad definition of the new woman that includes every type of woman. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct, Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 177, 178. Delap, The Feminist Avant-Garde, 2007, 16. The “Cult of True Womanhood” was the belief that women belonged at home and claimed they were the moral compass for their family and community. Robin Miller Jacoby, "The Women's Trade Union League and American Feminism," Feminist Studies III, no. 1/2 (Autumn 1975), 127.


5 NY Branch of the American Association of University Women St Lawrence County, Early College Women: Determined to be Educated, www.northnet.org/stlawrenceaauw/college.htm (accessed November 12, 2010).
community in the nation had a public school. Additionally, the availability of several varieties of reading material – newspapers, magazines and novels – became accessible in unprecedented quantities, encouraging many more people to learn to read.6

Education empowered women. It helped them to think more analytically, develop self-confidence and to “imagine the possibilities” of a more fulfilling life with expanded opportunities.7 Upon graduation, however, many of the early college graduates felt disappointment at the dearth of options open to them. Graduate schools and professional occupations were not as welcoming to these pioneering women as they had anticipated.8 Thus, many women elected to work in the plethora of reform organizations as Dennett did.

Others entered the field of education, usually as a teacher. A notable exception was Ella Flagg Young, who in 1909 became the nation’s first woman to actually lead a major urban school district. She was selected as superintendent of the Chicago Public school system and served in that capacity until 1915. In 1910, only one year after she was chosen superintendent, Flagg was again put in charge of a large organization. She became the first woman president of the National Education Association, the largest organization for educators in the country.9 Beginning with suffrage, Chapter Six discusses Dennett’s participation in several political movements during the early twentieth century, where she joined many new women to work towards social equality and develop her leadership skills.

---


7 Ibid., 21.


9 Ibid., xviii.
Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association

Dennett was distraught when Hartley abandoned her for another woman. During the time of their estrangement, he became less and less dependable for financial assistance, refusing to pay the court mandated child support.\textsuperscript{10} Bills from the family grocer and the Jordan Marsh Company were among several family debts that Hartley refused to pay. He changed the name on the accounts from his own to Mary’s, making her responsible for all food and clothing.\textsuperscript{11} Since Dennett declined to accept personal “gifts” from him, believing his only monetary responsibility was towards the children, her financial situation became quite desperate.\textsuperscript{12}

Forced to support herself and her two children, Dennett sought work in an area completely different from the life she had shared with Hartley. Although Mary and Hartley had worked together in several reform organizations, Hartley was never active in women’s suffrage. In December 1908, Dennett began her first fulltime position since working at Drexel before her marriage. The Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association (MWSA) hired her as their Field Secretary.\textsuperscript{13} Years later, Dennett

\textsuperscript{10} Dennett, “Cross Examination at Hearing,” 1913, 25, 26.

\textsuperscript{11} Dennett, “Testimony at Hearing,” 1913, 24.

\textsuperscript{12} Dennett, “Direct Examination at Hearing,” 1913, 178.

\textsuperscript{13} Helen Rappaport, \textit{Encyclopedia of Women Social Reformers, Volume I} (ABC-CLIO, 2001), 184.
recounted her decision to go into suffrage work in a letter she wrote to her friend Anna Shaw. She said, “I went into suffrage work, as perhaps you know, because I needed an anesthetic at the time and suffrage was the nearest thing at hand which was unconnected with my previous work.”\(^4\) Thus, Dennett began her life of struggle, transitioning from the private to the public sphere of influence.

Dennett played a prominent role in the suffrage movement, first as Field Secretary for the MWSA and later as Secretary of The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). In her capacity as Field Secretary Dennett excelled, eventually gaining attention by the national organization. She introduced a new method of recruiting members and educating the public about suffrage. Her strategy was to saturate an area with information by means of literature distribution and public meetings. In Springfield Massachusetts, Dennett organized a weeklong series of meetings, luncheons, teas and speeches that attracted tremendous interest and publicity about suffrage. In all, there were 38 meetings held during the week. About 6,000 people attended the meetings, 15,000 flyers were distributed and $15.00 worth of literature sold. Membership in the Springfield chapter increased by 100% and the chapter was reinvigorated by its success. Members were once again enthusiastic about continuing to work for suffrage. Dennett was credited with Springfield’s success.\(^5\)

The MWSA repeated the successful strategy throughout the state in places like Great Barrington, North Adams, Lee, Stockbridge, Lenox, Holyoke and North Hampton. Upon arriving in town Dennett, along with Bryn Mawr graduate Susan

\(^4\) Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Anna Shaw" (MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 211, August 17, 1912).

\(^5\) “Springfield Organization Week” (MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 203, n.d.).
Walker Fitzgerald and other MWSA members would ask the conductor to let them off at the busiest part of town. They would leave their bags at the local drugstore for safekeeping, check in with the police, unfurl their banner, pass out literature and hold a meeting later in the day where Dennett was one of the three speakers. More literature would be distributed and sold and reporters would frequently attend. Dennett described the experience as “one long scramble from beginning to end, sleeping, eating, traveling, speaking – speaking, traveling, eating, sleeping, with hardly a chink anywhere for so much as a fresh washing or a shampoo.” In this fashion, Dennett estimated they reached about 700 people each day.17

Dennett’s approach to suffrage was grounded in a very simple and pragmatic belief in the democratic ideal that voting privileges should be available to everyone. She saw suffrage as a necessary and natural step in the evolution of civilization and to the attainment of a complete democracy. Incipient democracy, she believed, could only develop into a democratic state when everyone was able to participate in citizenship, not just to observe it.18 When identifying suffrage for everybody as a requirement for democracy, evidence confirms that Dennett included African American women.

Race

The Northern, Western and Southern states each played a unique role in the suffrage movement. The movement began in the North, had its first triumphs in the

---


17 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Mrs. Page" (Framingham, MA: MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 203, August 24, 1909).

18 Mary Ware Dennett, “Address Before the Penn Federation of Women's Clubs” (Scranton: MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 208, October, 1910).
West, and experienced its most significant opposition in the South. In 1911, suffragist and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) member Martha Gruening attempted to introduce a resolution at the Louisville, Kentucky Convention calling on NAWSA to express “sympathy to black men and women who are fighting the same battle.” The resolution did not even make it out of committee and onto the floor of the convention. Anna Shaw, then President of NAWSA believed the resolution was inappropriate and would be a violation of good manners towards their Southern white hosts.

Dennett was asked to inform W.E.B. DuBois of their decision. In her letter, Dennett expressed regret and sorrow, and earnestly hoped that “a similar resolution will be presented at next year’s convention, and that those of us who care about the subject can have the privilege of doing our best to put it through.” No doubt, both Laura Clay and Kate Gordon played a prominent role in NAWSA’s racist position.

Clay sat on NAWSA’s executive board from 1895-1911 and Gordon from 1900-1909. As southerners, their mission at NAWSA was to protect the interests of the southern states. To that end, Gordon founded the Southern State Woman Suffrage Conference (SSWSC) in 1913, whose mission was to preserve “Southern Civilization,” that is white supremacy. Therefore, SSWSC was fiercely protective of state’s rights and


22 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to W.E.B. DuBois" (MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 209, November 14, 1911).
adamantly opposed federal legislation, even to the extent of campaigning against the nineteenth Amendment. Their belief in white supremacy was so virulent that SSWSC joined forces with the anti-suffragists in an attempt to block giving the vote to black women.

Before that, the SSWSC attempted to get NAWSA to underwrite their organization and to insist that all other southern suffrage groups fall under the SSWSC umbrella, essentially eliminating NAWSA’s work in the south. While the National was not opposed to support from states-rights women, they did not want to abandon their campaign for a federal Amendment in the south entirely. In a letter Gordon wrote to her confidante Laura Clay about the dispute, Gordon referred to Dennett as “that archdemon.”

In 1913, representatives from many of the African American women’s organizations located in and around the capital approached Alice Paul. They wanted to participate in the Washington DC Suffrage Parade that Paul was organizing. Her unwillingness to allow that to happen was obvious. She said she did not want to confuse the “negro problem” with the “suffrage problem” and, therefore, did not want the African American women to walk in the parade.


Dennett disagreed with Paul’s approach to race and wrote to her from New York saying, “The suffrage movement stands for enfranchising every woman in the United States.”27 A month later, she wrote to Paul again, saying the exclusion of African American women “amounted to official discrimination which is distinctly contrary to instructions from National Headquarters.”28 Although NAWSA wired Paul to allow blacks in the parade, Anna Shaw, NAWSA president, later told Paul that she supported her position of exclusion.29 According to Linda Lumsden, Dennett was the only leading suffragist who argued against Paul’s racially based omission.30 Ultimately, a small contingent of African American women marched at the back of the parade.31

Dennett’s position about race was particularly noteworthy because the first women’s suffrage organization, the American Equal Rights Association (AERA) disbanded over race. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony launched the AERA at the 1865 National Women’s Rights Convention. Only four years later, the organization split over the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave African American men, the right to vote. Cady Stanton and Anthony refused to support the amendment that enfranchised African American men but continued to exclude women.

---


29 Lumsden, *Rampant Women*, 1997, 91. Lumsden was a Journalism Professor at Arizona State University.

30 Ibid.

In contrast, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Blackwell, Lucretia Mott and Julia Ward Howe reluctantly agreed to support the amendment, believing that the needs of the black community were overwhelming and should take precedence over women’s suffrage. Frederick Douglas and Wendell Phillips convinced the four women to support the Fifteenth Amendment and the women added their weight to its ratification. Apparently, there was just enough radicalism in American government to support the enfranchisement of one group and the Douglas-Phillips alliance had a compelling argument for favoring African American men. Douglas said, “When women, because they are women, are hunted down through the streets of New York and New Orleans; when they are dragged from their houses and hung upon lampposts…when they are the objects of insult and outrage at every turn…then they will have an urgency to obtain the ballot equal to our own.”

While some women accepted the argument, others did not. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony created a new organization at the conclusion of the 1869 convention because they did not. The National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) was created to work towards women’s suffrage with a Sixteenth Amendment, without supporting the Fifteenth. Cady Stanton and Anthony used racist and elitist arguments to support their position. Asked whether she opposed the vote for black men ahead of women Cady Stanton responded unequivocally that she did. She said she would not have faith in them. “…[The black man] would be more despotic with the governing power than ever our Saxon rulers are.” Cady Stanton wanted to go into the “kingdom”

32 Ibid., 140, 141, 139.
33 Ibid., 168.
together, but if that was not possible, she said, educated white women warranted the vote ahead of ignorant, illiterate black men.34

In response to the new organization created by Cady Stanton and Anthony, the four women – Stone, Blackwell, Mott and Howe – who supported the Fifteenth Amendment called for a convention of their own in Cleveland. A rival organization of NWSA, the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), was established.

Illustration 4: Women’s Suffrage Associations

Because AWSA did not want to interfere with the ratification of the Fifteenth amendment, AWSA’s leadership focused their strategies solely on the state level.35 The leaders of AWSA concentrated their energy on women’s suffrage. They chose to avoid

34 Ibid., 141, 126. While it is tempting to discount Cady Stanton because of her racist comments, a one-dimensional assessment does not allow for an understanding of what DuBois considers her complex, radical feminist ideology, developed over forty years of work for women’s emancipation. Ellen DuBois and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "On Labor and Free Love: Two Unpublished Speeches of Elizabeth Cady Stanton," Signs I, no. 1 (Autumn 1975).

35 Matthews, Women's Struggle, 1997, 142.
controversial issues such as divorce and free love while still supporting ratification of the Fifteenth amendment. Whereas AWSA concentrated on women’s suffrage alone, NWSA tackled a broad spectrum of issues. The two groups were reunited in 1890 to form The National American Woman Suffrage Association.  

Alice Stone Blackwell, the only child of Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, is credited with facilitating the merger.

In 1915, Carrie Chapman Catt, the successor of Anna Shaw as NAWSA president, believed a constitutional amendment for women’s suffrage could pass with support from the south. She therefore did not want to associate with any form of racial controversy for fear of alienating the southerners. Race continued to be a divisive issue within NAWSA.

The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA)

In August 1910, NAWSA acknowledged Dennett’s exemplary work for suffrage on the local level. At the national convention, they elected her to the board as corresponding secretary. Dennett moved to New York at the urging of Anna Howard, Shaw, medical doctor and NAWSA President. Bryn Mawr’s President, M. (Martha) Carey Thomas urged Shaw to insist that Dennett move to the association’s New York

---

36 Ibid., 178.


38 Matthews, Women's Struggle, 1997, 135.

39 Dennett is the fifth woman from the left in the first row of Figure 10. "Portrait of Members of the National American Woman Suffrage Association" (Boston, MA: Schlessinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, c. 1917-1919).
headquarters. She did. Carey Thomas’s influence on Shaw is important to note because Dennett later accused Shaw of being unduly influenced by wealthy backers. Presumably M. Carey Thomas, Bryn Mawr’s second president, would have the equivalent wealth and privilege by way of social capital.

With Mary working in New York, five-year old Devon stayed with Dennett’s childhood friend Mrs. Smith in the Framingham Massachusetts home built by Mary and Hartley. He lived there with the Smith family until he was old enough to join Carleton at boarding school. Ten-year old Carleton attended the Danforth School, a small family school with fifteen students. Dennett usually went to see them every two to three weeks. In between visits, she wrote them long letters that included her thoughts on politics and books, motherly advice and words of love.

In 1910, Dennett became executive secretary of NAWSA and chair of the Literature Department, producing and distributing millions of pieces of suffrage literature each year. By 1914, she was also on the Board of Directors of The Literature Company. Dennett earned $2,500 annually. She traveled to places like

40 M. Carey Thomas, "Letter to Anna Howard Shaw, President NAWSA" (MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 204, April 21, 1910), 335, 336.

41 Dennett, "Testimony at Hearing." February 15-21, 1913, 27.


43 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Member of the Official Board" (New York: MWD Papere, Reel 11, Folder 214, April 14, 1914).

Alabama and Georgia on speaking tours and did congressional work, but her primary interest was with the Literature Department.\textsuperscript{45}

In a statement delivered before the members of the 1911 convention, Dennett reported that correspondence had doubled over the previous year’s output and included international communication with countries such as Canada, Finland, Japan, Switzerland and South Africa. Almost every state had requested information and the production of literature had tripled. Included were 30,000 copies of the leaflet *What to Do* as well as almost 45,000 convention seals and 13,000 suffrage stamps. At the 1912 convention, Dennett reported that 3,000,000 pieces of literature were published in that year alone, with a net gain of $3,574. The literature included several articles by Dennett.\textsuperscript{46}

In one popular article, Dennett quoted the foundational principle of the Declaration of Independence as “government by the people.” Reminding her readers of the “loud hurrahs” given to politicians when they talked about “government by the people,” Dennett asked if women were not people also, just like men, and deserving of the same rights. Even the most fervent anti-suffragist would never say women were not people. She concluded the argument by asking, how it was possible, that in a “government by the people” women are dispassionately excluded from the vote as if they never existed?\textsuperscript{47} The article was aptly titled *The Simplicity of the Suffrage Question*.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{45} Husted Harper, *Volume V*, 1922, 335, Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Lads (Sons)" (MWD Papers, October 31, 1915); Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Sons" (MWD Papers, February 27, 1914).

\textsuperscript{46} Husted Harper, *History of Women’s Suffrage*, 1922, 335.

\textsuperscript{47} It is possible that Dennett’s argument was influenced by a speech given by Sojourner Truth in Akron Ohio at the second women’s rights convention in 1852. The speech is commonly referred to as “Ain’t I a
Later, Dennett wrote an article for *The Trend* titled *The Real Point*. It became the most popular leaflet of NAWSA. Like *The Simplicity of the Suffrage Question*, Dennett used an extremely simple argument to promote women’s suffrage. She said that while questions regarding discrimination towards women, laws about women and children and their credentials to vote may be interesting points of discussion, the real point is something quite different. She said, “It is time to stop that sort of work as suffrage work, and concentrate all our energies on the real point – namely, that the qualifications for voting shall be made without regard to sex.” By August of 1912, Dennett was getting restless with the limitations of her suffrage work and she considered resigning from NAWSA. Dennett suggested to Anna Shaw that they expand and deepen the scope of suffrage work to include “all the forms of radicalism which have any connection with citizenship and personal freedom.” She wanted to connect suffrage to the systemic social problems of the time. In a letter to Shaw, Dennett seemed deeply frustrated as she wrote about her disappointment with the narrow suffrage focus. Dennett chided herself, however, saying she should have known the suffrage movement would become stagnant because in time all organizations tend towards complacency and begin to “petrify.” She viewed the political positions of the leaders in the women’s suffrage movement as more...

---

48 Mary Ware Dennett, "The Simplicity of the Suffrage Question" (MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 214, April-November, 1914).


51 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Anna Shaw" (MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 211, 212, August 17, 1912), 12.
conservative than the public, whose opinions they had largely shaped themselves in prior years.52

Dennett wanted to see a return to the dynamic spirit characteristic of the early suffrage pioneers who addressed broader issues than the ballot. She imagined an organization that would embrace change and serve as a training school for the “realization of democracy.” The school would help newly enfranchised women to understand how freedom and equality were central elements in reaching the democratic ideal. Time was critical, Dennett believed, because it was important to educate each woman before she became accustomed to letting others think for her and before she fell into party ruts. Additionally, Dennett expressed concern about the financial support of NAWSA. She wanted to see the organization maintained by the contributions of many people, rather than limited to a few rich donors.53

Disheartened by the conservative nature of NAWSA, Dennett and her closest friend, Jessie Ashley, decided to resign. Alice Stone Blackwell wrote to Dennett in an attempt to convince her to stay, as did Anna Shaw and other suffrage leaders. Dennett reconsidered, in part because of the 1912 convention in Philadelphia where Alice Paul was appointed chair of the Congressional Committee of NAWSA. Although Dennett disagreed with many of Paul’s militant actions, she recognized her organizational acumen. Paul wanted to address suffrage on the federal level and Dennett saw the value and potential effectiveness of a federal approach. Evidence suggests that Dennett recognized a federal amendment would include suffrage for black women as well as

52 Ibid., 13, 14, 3, 4.
53 Ibid., 12-14.
white and that she endorsed that inclusivity. She became enthusiastic about suffrage once again. After the convention, Dennett felt restored and continued her work at NAWSA as Executive Secretary for two more years. Dennett’s discontent and frustration returned, however, and the pivot point came only two years later.54

Paul’s affiliation with NAWSA did not last long either. In 1913, only one year after she was appointed chair of the Congressional Committee, Paul and Lucy Burns began a new organization. The Congressional Union for Women’s Suffrage (CU) was created as an affiliate of NAWSA after repeated problems surfaced between NAWSA and the Congressional Committee. For a short time, the two organizations remained connected, but in February of 1914, NAWSA and the CU separated because of their divergent views. Anna Shaw and Carrie Chapman Catt were concerned that working for suffrage on the national level would alienate the southern states who wanted to exclude black women from getting enfranchised. Shaw and Catt did not want to alienate any potential supporters, while the CU continued its push for a Federal amendment.55

On April 4, 1914, two months after the split between NAWSA and the CU, Dennett attempted to resign as Chair of the Literature Committee and as a member of the Board of Directors of the Literature Company of NAWSA.56 For the moment, Dennett retained her position as Executive Secretary. After Dennett resigned from both

54 Chen, Dennett, 1996, 143.


56 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Member of the Official Board" (MWD Papers, Reel 11, Folder 214, April 4, 1914).
the Literature Committee and the board of the publishing department, NAWSA board members voted to combine the positions of executive secretary and head of the publishing company into one position, thereby rejecting Dennett’s desire to detach herself from the publishing company. Never one to accept bullying, Dennett resigned completely from NAWSA.  

After several years of disquiet, Dennett finally resigned because of a budget dispute with the executive board. The Board passed a resolution contradicting the previous convention’s budget and the intended use of the appropriated funds. The majority of board members believed there were insufficient funds to carry out the work stipulated by the convention. Consequently, the National Board proposed to limit the work of the Literature Company and the data department, thereby crippling the work at headquarters.

Concurrently, the board voted to allocate funds for the congressional committee, where no funds had been appropriated at the convention. Dennett was “amazed and dismayed at the vote,” while strongly supporting the work of the congressional committee. For Dennett, the dispute was about the ethics of abiding by the appropriations decided upon by members of the convention, not about the value of the committee. She believed there were sufficient funds to carry out the work specified at


58 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Member of the Board" (New York: MWD Papers, Reel 11, Folder 214, October 15, 1914).

59 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Official Board Member" (MWD Papers, Reel 11, Folder 214, April 18, 1914).

60 Ibid.
the convention and said so at great length in several letters and reports to the board. Dennett believed the board had a moral and ethical obligation to implement the budget as determined by the convention.

Dennett accused the board of deliberately voting on a new budget when the full board was not present to vote, thereby giving the board members who were present an unfair advantage in achieving the outcome they wished. She blamed them for taking unnecessary “heart-breaking and unjust” actions such as halving one employee’s salary and requiring another to contribute one fifth of hers to NAWSA. After consulting with the association’s legal counsel, Dennett implied that the board’s reallocation of funds was illegal and she said their decisions had unnecessarily crippled the work at NAWSA headquarters. She accused Anna Shaw of pandering to Mrs. Stanley McCormick, who was a wealthy patron of NAWSA.

Board member Harriet B. Laidlaw shot back with accusations of her own. She labeled Dennett’s concerns chronic attacks and suggested that Dennett either stop her sulking, disloyalty and disinclination to follow the majority’s decision, or resign. Letters flew between Dennett, NAWSA president, Anna Shaw and Laidlaw. Dennett refused to forsake her personal honor just to vote with the majority, as if it were “indecent to disagree.” She said, “Even majorities have been known to be wrong on

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid
64 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Miss Shaw" (New York: MWD Papers, Reel 19, Folder 214, September 1, 1914).
No doubt Dennett had knowledge of Shaw’s racism and it surely contributed to her resignation. Dennett’s last report to the Board as Executive Secretary of NAWSA was delivered on September 1, 1914, the effective date of her resignation.67

Dennett never lost her passion for suffrage and her ability to reduce all the complexities for and against it to its essential core. In a letter to Carleton, Dennett gave him advice on an upcoming school debate about the vote for women. She told him that the strongest argument he could use when the other team says “women don’t need it, don’t want it, aren’t fit for it, etc. is that men vote whether they need it, want it, or are fit.”68

Dennett was 42 when she resigned from NAWSA. She was not the same person she had been six years earlier when she first began working for the vote in Massachusetts. In 1908, Hartley had only recently abandoned her. She was publicly humiliated and in such deep anguish that she blocked out the very worst parts of her suffering.69 She knew nothing about birth control, and

---

66 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Mrs. Laidlaw" (MWD Papers, Reel 11, Folder 214, April 28, 1914).

67 Mary Ware Dennett, "Report of the Executive Secretary from Dec. 5, 1913-Sept. 6, 1914" (New York: MWD Papers, Reel 11, Folder 214, 1914).

68 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to son Carleton" (MWD Papers, November 16, 1915).

apart from the three years she worked at Drexel, she had been dependant on others for support.

By 1914, however, Dennett was an independent New Yorker, belonging to a close-knit community of like-minded radical feminists. She was reading Havelock Ellis and Freud and participating in other reform organizations. Dennett did not leave NAWSA empty handed. She had learned to work within a large organization and to write and deliver her own speeches, pen articles for publication and how to organize and implement campaigns. She had marched in parades and had the courage to take unpopular positions that alienated her from colleagues. She appeared unafraid and resolute in the stances she took. Most importantly, she was financially independent and able to provide for her two boys at the same time that she balanced the demands of work and travel. Looking back, Dennett must have felt great pride in her self-sufficiency, but once again, she was in a quandary about how to support her family.70 No doubt, her friends from Heterodoxy helped her to manage, and to grow and develop even further.

**Heterodoxy**

*There was a club called Heterodoxy for unorthodox women, that is to say, women who did things and did them openly. Women who worked*.71

Heterodoxy, a radical feminist club in Greenwich Village, had only one requirement for membership. Women had to hold unconventional views and the more

---

70 Chen, *Dennett*, 1996, 155, 149.

extreme the better. Heterodites met every other Saturday at Polly Halliday’s, a popular McDougal Street restaurant, where Bohemian New Yorkers gravitated because of the low-priced and delicious food. Marie Jenney Howe, a former Unitarian minister and social activist known for her wit, intelligence and kind heart, started the group in 1912. She served as the group’s much-loved facilitator until her death in 1934. The club continued until the early 1940s.

In Heterodoxy, Dennett found a coterie of extraordinary women who investigated and challenged the traditional boundaries of feminism, politics, sexuality and economics. The women of Heterodoxy provided the support and intellectual insight that Dennett seemed to crave and could not satisfy with the women of NAWSA. Frustrated with the limitations of suffrage work, she wanted to explore deeper issues and the Heterodites provided the perfect forum for her exploration.

Who were the Heterodites?

The women of Heterodoxy were at the vanguard of feminism. They challenged the limitations of nineteenth century suffragists who focused on the relatively narrow legal and political aspects of getting the vote. Heterodites questioned issues of personal freedom, gender equality and economic independence as well. They worked to alter the

---


power relationships between men and women in their personal lives as well as in the larger community.⁷⁵

Some of the most powerful and well-known women of New York regularly attended Heterodoxy meetings. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Dennett’s sometime friend was a suffragist, novelist, poet and member of Heterodoxy. Other Heterodites included Mary Shaw, actress and ardent feminist; dancer and choreographer, Agnes DeMille; Rose Pastor Stokes, ex-cigar maker, birth control advocate and Socialist/ Communist; Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, labor activist, Communist and inspiration for Joe Hill’s song, *The Rebel*; and physician and public health administrator, Sara Josephine Baker. Socialists, Communists, Suffragists, journalists, actors and novelists, all found a haven within Heterodoxy.⁷⁶ They explored new ways to be a woman, constructed relationships and learned to be self-sufficient. With Dennett’s desire to expand the meaning of autonomy for women, she fit right in with Heterodoxy’s *new women* of New York.⁷⁷

In 1912, Dennett wrote to the editor of the Freewoman, a feminist magazine in the UK about her version of the ideal world. It consisted of three basic requirements: the total economic independence of women, extensive knowledge about birth control and the complete elimination of all forms of special privilege. For men to become

---


complete human beings “instead of mere males” Dennett continued, they must contribute to childrearing in a significant way. One can imagine lively exchanges about Dennett’s views as well as issues surrounding trade unionism, anarchy, pacifism, Freud, the Russian Revolution, civil rights, disabled women and the conflict in Ireland.

The club was exclusively female, composed mainly of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, with a few Jewish members included. Only one black woman, Grace Nail Johnson, an activist within the NAACP was part of the club. Many lesbians were Heterodites and the group appears to have accepted them completely. Anniversaries were celebrated and lesbian couples received “strong emotional support if a partner was sick or died.” Lesbian couples included Katharine Anthony and Elisabeth Irwin, Dr. Sarah Josephine Baker and Ida A.R. Wylie, Helen Hull and Marion Robinson, Paula Jacobi and Anne Van Vechten, and Helen Arthur and Agnes Morgan. According to Schwarz, inconclusive evidence exists that at least nine other women were also lesbians.

**Practices**

78 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to the Editor of the Freewoman" (New York: MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 210, April 17, 1912).


82 Ibid., 68, 69.
Marie Jenney Howe called her friends in Heterodoxy a “merry band of willful women, the most unruly and individualistic women you ever fell among.” Heterodites were completely irreverent and wrote several satires and spoofs about the club. In *Marrige Customs and Taboo Among the Early Heterodites*, the member’s views about taboos were explained. They believed that taboos thwarted the development of a free mind and spirit. Therefore, any sort of taboo was strictly taboo. The satire illustrates the radicalism of the group.

According to the spoof, the sex customs of the “Early Heterodites” fell into three main categories: *monotonists*, *varietists* and *resistants*. The *monotonists* usually mated when young, and because of tradition, inertia and the difficulty of unmating, they usually stayed that way. The *varietists* preferred a series of matings to ceremonial mating, and the *resistants* did not mate at all. Very few true *resistants* existed. Because custom rewarded virginity, many *varietists* assumed the outward appearance of *resistants*.

In addition to amusing themselves with self-created parodies, guest speakers would attend meetings and present the Heterodites with their perspective on the issues of the day. Featured guests included Helen Keller, Emma Goldman, Amy Lowell and Margaret Sanger. The Heterodites did not believe that emancipation for women was

---

83 Ibid., 82.


85 Ibid., 95, 96.

enough. They explored issues about marriage, child rearing, economic independence and sexuality.\textsuperscript{87} They wanted to free themselves from the constraints of the “man-made woman.”\textsuperscript{88} Howe described the purpose of Heterodoxy succinctly when she stated, “We intend simply to be ourselves, not just our little female selves, but our whole big human selves.”\textsuperscript{89} The members of Heterodoxy provided Dennett with the friendship, support, camaraderie and intellectual stimulation that she needed to become her whole big human self.

Perhaps Dennett was able to take radical or controversial positions because of the friendship and support she received from Heterodoxy members. In her work with the Peace Movement, she remained committed to pacifism, even after that position was viewed as unpatriotic. Dennett was part of a local peace organization that broke away from the national movement when they began to capitulate their position on peace. Many members of the new group were Heterodites.

\textbf{Peace, Politics and Repression}

In 1914, when the First World War began in Europe, suffragists Anna Shaw, Carrie Chapman Catt and Harriet Stanton Blatch and Heterodites, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Crystal Eastman marched in a contingent of 1,500 women in protest against the war. The women wore black to show their sympathy for the pain and suffering in Europe. They walked in silence to the muted beating of drums. The drums


\textsuperscript{88} John Pettegrew, \textit{Brutes in Suits: Male Sensibility in America, 1890-1920} (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 51, 52.

\textsuperscript{89} Nancy Cott, \textit{The Grounding of Modern Feminism} (Binghampton: Vail-Ballou Press, 1987), 39.
underscored the solemnity of their march down New York’s Fifth Avenue. As the peace flag unfurled, showing a dove holding an olive branch, the marchers were greeted with applause from the crowds who gathered to watch. Dennett was one of the marchers.90

This was not Dennett’s first encounter with the Peace movement. She came from a family of outspoken and accomplished peace activists. Her Aunt Lucia and Uncle Ned were devoted to peace. Aunt Lucia served as Director of the American Peace Society and was part of the American delegation to the Woman’s Peace Conference at The Hague in 1915.91 Uncle Ned was director of the World Peace Society.92 Dennett followed their example.

**The Woman’s Peace Party (WPP)**

The anti-war movement of the First World War unleashed a host of organizations dedicated to peace. Shortly after the war began the first feminist peace organization in American history, the Woman’s Peace Party, emerged.93 It was a product of the activities following the New York Peace Parade of August 29, 1914. Fanny Garrison Villard, chair of the parade and daughter of William Lloyd Garrison hoped the parade would stimulate a woman’s organization devoted to peace.94 The Woman’s Peace Party (WPP) was formed and Dennett was involved, serving on the

---


board in 1918. After the U.S entered the war in early 1917, members of the Woman’s Peace Party began to modify their position. Some accepted and others even supported American intervention in Europe as well as President Wilson’s intent to “make the world safe for democracy.”

**New York City: Woman’s Peace Party**

The women of New York City, however, were still determined to oppose American intervention in the war. They formed a new branch of the WPP (NYC-WPP) that consisted of radical feminists such as Heterodites Crystal Eastman, Anne Herendeen, Katharine Anthony and Elisabeth Irwin as well as Dennett. They campaigned against military preparedness with members of the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM) to protest the state’s Slater Law. The law mandated that boys between sixteen and nineteen attend three hours of military drills each week and attend a two-to four-week military preparation camp during the summer.

To advance their agenda, the NYC-WPP began *Four Lights*, a journal that provided a feminist critique of war activities and Dennett was one of its editors. *Four Lights* symbolized a significant change for early twentieth century women reformers. The women of the national association were defined by the Victorian constraints of separate spheres. Their brand of pacifism was about the special relationship women had

---

95 Dennett, “Biographical Notes,” ~1930, 3.


97 Ibid.


to war. The new women in the NYC-WPP connected war with broader social issues and were far more provocative in their political actions.\textsuperscript{100}

Along with \textit{Four Lights} editor Mary Knickerbocker Angell, Dennett worked to educate the public about internationalism and the interrelated issues of humanity. Together they published \textit{The ABC's of Internationalism}, a listing of all the international organizations that began with the alphabet’s first three letters from the Library of Congress. Their goal was to reveal the kinds of collaboration and helpfulness that existed between nations.\textsuperscript{101}

Dennett was one of the seven charter members of the People’s Council of America.\textsuperscript{102} Joining her on the Council were \textit{Four Lights} editors and Heterodites Elsie Clews Parsons and Fola La Follette. The Council was a radical organization with strong Socialist and trade union ties that surfaced in late May, 1917. They campaigned to repeal the draft and protest the war. They worked for women’s suffrage, labor rights, anti-lynching and birth control. Additionally, they lobbied to form a worldwide organization to circumvent future wars.\textsuperscript{103}

\textbf{American Union Against Militarism (AUAM)}

In 1916 Dennett became field secretary for the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM), the organization that worked with the NYC-WPP to block

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{100} Kuhlman, "Women's Ways in War," 1997.
\textsuperscript{102} Dennett, “Biographical Notes,” ~1930.
\end{flushright}
preparedness legislation in the public schools and helped to lay the foundation for the American Civil Liberties Union.\textsuperscript{104} In her capacity as field secretary, Dennett organized and managed several mass meetings in five “middle-west” cities for the campaign against military preparedness.\textsuperscript{105} With Dennett’s experience campaigning for suffrage, she was a natural candidate for the position.

Unfortunately for Carleton and Devon, the assignment meant that she would not be able to stay with them as planned during their school vacation. Dennett sent her regrets to Carleton and Devon and expressed her disappointment about not being able to be with them. She said she had to accept the position because it meant cash, valuable experience and the possibility of continued work.\textsuperscript{106}

**Politics, Repression and Birth of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)**

Additionally, Dennett served as Executive Secretary of the Women’s Committee to elect Wilson in 1916. From 1916-1917, she was the national secretary of the League for Progressive Democracy, which was the Women’s Division of the National Democratic Committee. She resigned after Wilson led the country into war.\textsuperscript{107}

Shortly after Wilson gave his congressional war address, social activists Crystal Eastman and Roger Baldwin called an emergency meeting of the Executive Committee of the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM). Soon afterwards, they created the


\textsuperscript{105} Dennett, “Biographical Notes,” 1930.

\textsuperscript{106} Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Dearest Lads" (MWD Papers, Reel 1, March, 1916).

\textsuperscript{107} Mary Ware Dennett, "On Mary Ware Dennett" (MWD Papers, Folder 9, n.d.).
National Civil Liberties Bureau (NCLB), which was the precursor to the ACLU. The
date was October 1, 1917. The fledgling organization dealt with conscientious
objectors, first amendment rights, political spying and the right of assembly among
other war related issues.\textsuperscript{108}

Dennett’s exact contribution to the formation of the NCLB is not clear, but the
facts suggest that she was involved from the very beginning. Dennett worked with
Baldwin and Eastman who were the two founders of the NCLB, with the AUAM, which
was the organization that spawned the NCLB, and closely with Baldwin during the
war.\textsuperscript{109} Additionally, she knew Crystal Eastman from Heterodoxy and shared similar
approaches to political action with her. They worked in some of the same
organizations.\textsuperscript{110} Lastly, her political interests – civil liberties, equality and freedom of
information –were closely aligned with the NCLB goals. Dennett’s early involvement
with the NCLB is important because it establishes her as an early, active and committed
civil libertarian, qualities that contributed to her ability to publish \textit{The Sex Side of Life}.

Dennett was among a distinguished group of women social reformers and
activists –Jane Addams, Crystal Eastman and Jeannette Rankin – who were influential in
beginning the ACLU in 1920.\textsuperscript{111} The ACLU was born out of the US government’s
repressive actions during World War 1. Peace activists were jailed and anti-war material


\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 84.

\textsuperscript{110} Schwarz, \textit{Heterodoxy}, 1983, 88; Eastman worked with Dennett in the WPP, NYC-WPP and the

\textsuperscript{111} The ACLU and Women’s Rights: Proud History, Continuing Struggle, ACLU, November 30, 2010,
was banned from the US mail. With rampant jingoism, mobs of vigilantes tarred and feathered alleged critics of the war. Anti-German feelings were so widespread that sauerkraut was renamed liberty cabbage and hamburgers, liberty burgers.\footnote{Samuel Walker, \textit{In Defence of American Liberties: a History of the ACLU} (Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 15.}

The next section is about Dennett’s work with the Single Tax League and The Twilight Sleep Association.\footnote{Twilight Sleep was a method of drug induced painless childbirth. It is no longer used.} Both activities had a strong connection to Dennett’s personal life. Her inability to earn a living through art contributed to Dennett’s involvement with the Single Tax League. Dennett’s long and painful experiences giving birth to her children clearly contributed to her interest in the painless childbirth of Twilight Sleep.

\section*{Additional Reform Work}

\textit{I became a single taxer through two agencies; one my own facing of the bread and butter problem as an individual producer and the discovery that merit is not the gauge of economic success, but that success hinges on some form of privilege other than getting acquainted with the public.}\footnote{Amy Mali Hicks, \textit{Single Tax Women of the Metropolitan District}, Vol. 14, in \textit{The Single Tax Review, A Record of Single Tax and Tax Reform Throughout the World}, ed. Joseph Dana Miller (January-February, 1914), 45.}

\section*{Single Tax League}

Dennett was a staunch supporter of the single tax, a movement that Henry George began in the 1880s. Although Dennett was a single taxer for many years, evidence of her active involvement did not begin until 1913, when she became Chair of
the Committee for new voters of the Woman’s Henry George League. Her initial interest in economics began while she was still in her teens. After hearing a lecture given by the English Fabian, William Clark, Dennett said her worldview, that is her economic view, was altered forever. The Fabian Society attempted to establish a socialist state via education and political influence. It appears that Dennett was intrigued.

The Single Tax is about taxing landowners based on ownership of the land itself, regardless of any improvement to the property. No other taxes would be levied. The theory is that taxing a property based on upgrades decreases the landowner’s motivation to develop the land. Taxing the land itself, however, would incentivize the landowner to develop it in a profitable manner so that the owner could afford to pay the high taxes on it. The same holds true for taxing income. According to the Single Taxers, if individuals were taxed according to their income there would be no incentive to work harder, faster or more efficiently. They believed that taxation related to production of any kind, whether for the capitalist or for the laborer, created an obstacle to the creation of wealth, thereby creating conditions for poverty to flourish.

Members of The Single Tax League attempted to construct an equitable

---


116 Mark W. Van Wienen, "A Rose By Any Other Name: Charlotte Perkins Stetson (Gilman); the Case for American Reform Socialism," American Quarterly, December 2003, 604.

117 Although the article does not explicitly say that Dennett’s outlook was changed, evidence suggests that she began to develop an abhorrence towards monopolies and to privilege of any kind. Hicks, Single Tax Women, 1914, 41.

distribution of wealth whereby no individuals received unearned advantages.\textsuperscript{119} Single Taxers were adamantly opposed to monopolies of any kind. They viewed land monopolies as the key reason for poverty and believed the single tax would eliminate land monopolies.\textsuperscript{120}

Originally, Hartley introduced Dennett to Single Tax concepts during the early years of their marriage. At the same time she became more involved with the Arts and Crafts movement and in her work as an artist, Dennett became increasingly drawn to the economic aspects of an artisan’s life. The artisan’s inability to earn a living wage through art disturbed her on both a personal and humanitarian level. She began to link the needs of the artist and artisan with the economic conditions created by industrial capitalism. Like Ruskin and Morris, she believed that true art could exist only when the artisan had achieved economic freedom.\textsuperscript{121} Thus, she was attracted to Henry George’s Single Tax.

While Dennett never proclaimed that she was a socialist or belonged to a socialist organization, her repugnance for privilege of any kind certainly had socialist underpinnings. Others noticed the connection as well. During the conflict she had with the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts, Herbert Langford Warren, third president of the society, accused Dennett of being a Socialist. He said the ties of the Arts and Crafts associations to socialism have forced many Americans to distrust the movement and the Boston’s Society’s success was due largely to its avoidance of such controversy.

\textsuperscript{119} Henry George, "What It Is and Why We Urge It," \textit{Christian Advocate}, 1890.

\textsuperscript{120} Kiefer, "What is the Single Tax?," 1909, 30.

\textsuperscript{121} Dennett, "Aesthetics and Ethics," 1902, 37, 38.
He endorsed “commercialism, the subdivision of labor, and the machine” because it made the twentieth century such a revitalizing success. Warren credited industrialization with creating many more opportunities, in terms of jobs and the availability of goods. Arts and Crafts, he said, should stick to elevating the public taste. Friend and ally Arthur A. Carey adamantly denied the accusation. Dennett resigned from the Arts and Society because she did not support commercialism or the fragmentation of labor. In fact, she was vehemently opposed to both. Dennett became more involved with organizations that she believed did “more to promote industrial democracy” such as the Single Tax and Consumers’ Leagues. The Consumers’ League of Massachusetts advocated for socially responsible consumption, by purchasing goods from sources that provided acceptable working conditions.

Dennett was a quick study. From Alice Paul and her experiences with southern racism, she developed an appreciation for federal, rather than state legislation. Her recommendation to the Single Tax organization in 1914 appears as a direct result of Paul’s federal approach to suffrage. Dennett suggested that the organization have a Single Tax Bill pending in Congress at all times. “This will be a nucleus around which Single Tax efforts can be centered. It will give a national organization always something to work

---

122 Lears, No Place of Grace, 1994, 87, 88.
123 Carey recounted his response to Warren in: Arthur Astor Carey, "Letter to Mary Ware Dennett" (MWD Papers, Folder 139, November 15, 1903).
124 For a complete disclosure of Dennett’s views about commercialism and art see: Dennett, “Aesthetics and Ethics,” May 1902.
125 Borris, Craftsman’s Ideal, 1986, 40.
for.” Dennett said this “weapon” was extremely successful in suffrage work and she felt certain the same would hold true for the Single Tax movement.\textsuperscript{127}

Dennett’s reform activities were quite diverse but the undergirding themes that drove her work remained consistent. Her commitment to the dispersement of knowledge stayed constant. In her involvement with the Single Tax League, she gave talks about Single Tax principles to inform the public. With the Twilight Sleep Association, she worked to educate the public about painless childbirth.

**Twilight Sleep**

Dennett was active in the Twilight Sleep Association, an organization she helped to establish in 1915, a very busy year for Dennett. During the same year, she helped to organize the nation’s first birth control organization and wrote *The Sex Side of Life*. The following year, 1916, she served as the association’s president.\textsuperscript{128} The organization offered women information about painless childbirth. The use of Twilight Sleep had tremendous appeal for Dennett on both an individual and a social level. With three horrific labor and deliveries behind her, Dennett knew first-hand what kind of relief Twilight Sleep could offer women. Dennett lived in a self-chosen, female dominated milieu, which made the progression between the personal and the political a natural transition.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[127] Hicks, *Single Tax Women*, 1914, 250.
\item[128] Chen, *Dennett*, 1996, 150; Dennett includes several biographical listings of activities with her papers. Some include contradictory dates such as when she served as president of the Twilight Sleep Association. One list said she served 1913-1914 and another 1916. This research uses 1916 because it is consistent with the Association’s beginning in 1915. Mary Ware Dennett, "On Mary Ware Dennett" (MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 9, n.d.); Mary Ware Dennett, “Re: Mary Ware Dennett, Biographical Notes” (MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folders 1, 9, ~1930), 2.
\end{footnotes}
In June of 1914, an article appeared in *McClure’s Magazine* touting the benefits of Twilight Sleep, a new and revolutionary method of painless childbirth. McClure writers Marguerite Tracy and Constance Leupp presented Twilight Sleep as an antidote to the commonly held belief that women should bear their children “in sorrow.”¹²⁹ Doctors Krönig and Gauss from the Frauenkenklinik in Freiberg, Germany developed the method. They used a combination of two narcotics – scopolamine and morphium to induce a light sleep and loss of memory.¹³⁰ According to Tracy and Leupp, while the cerebrum or thinking portion of the brain slept, the cerebellum remained awake so that labor could proceed without the use of forceps.¹³¹ In other words, the body still experienced the pain and discomfort of childbirth and could respond to directions, but it did not transmit the pain message to the cerebrum. Thus, by the time women awoke from their drug-induced sleep, they remembered nothing about their labor and delivery.¹³²

Women responded to the possibility of painless childbirth with such widespread interest, eagerness and enthusiasm that a flurry of articles and books about the advantages of Twilight Sleep soon followed the 1914 McClure article.¹³³ One American mother was so delighted with the experience that she said “I would have it [the next baby] in


¹³² Tracy, “Painless Childbirth,” 1914, 42.
Freiberg, if I had to walk all the way from California.”134 The medical establishment, however, did not embrace Twilight Sleep in the same way. The ensuing debate between the medical establishment and the laywomen who introduced it in the U.S. was very controversial.135

The majority of American doctors focused on the drug’s adverse affects, believing that Twilight Sleep increased the risk of harm to both mother and child.136 Dr. William H. Wellington Knipe, attending obstetrician at Gouverneur Hospital responded to the criticism by saying, “The difficulty has been that there are so few physicians who are competent to properly give the treatment.”137 The New York Times accused medical authorities of repeating the mistakes of narrow-minded medical practitioners and scientists of the past, where new discoveries were often met with indignation and contempt.138 Henry Smith Williams, medical doctor and attorney offered three reasons for the medical establishment’s rejection of Twilight Sleep. First, he credited the biblical reference, “In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children,” as a primordial curse similar to original sin, where the need for every laboring woman to experience pain was justified.


134 Tracy, "Painless Childbirth," 1914, 39.


Next he blamed poor hospital facilities and the inferior training of American Obstetricians and Gynecologists.¹³⁹

Stella Lehr, M.D. of Berkeley explained the opposing views within the medical profession very simply. According to Lehr, American doctors practiced two methods of Twilight Sleep. The original Gauss-Krönig method employed individualized dosages of scopolamine and morphium based on the patient’s response. The Gauss-Krönig process had excellent outcomes. The Siegel technique was based on the original method, but it relied on standardized dosages and did not have the same positive outcomes. Lehr concluded that with careful observation and administration of proper dosages, Twilight Sleep offered an effective means to alleviate the pain of childbirth with no danger to mother or baby.¹⁴⁰ In a second McClure’s article, Boyd and Tracy accused American doctors of rejecting Twilight Sleep because it consumed too much time and cost too much money.¹⁴¹

Advocates for Twilight Sleep viewed American doctors who were sluggish to investigate and adopt Twilight Sleep as obstructionists. They accused the medical establishment of deliberately withholding access to information about painless childbirth from American women.¹⁴² Twilight Sleep advocates believed they had the right to experience painless childbirth if they chose to do so. They believed the decision of

---


whether or not to utilize Twilight Sleep should be left to the mother and not to the physician.\textsuperscript{143}

In response to the resistance of medical doctors, several women organized the Twilight Sleep Association in 1915. Dennett was among the founders and was initially one of the two vice presidents in the fledgling organization. With three ghastly births behind her, Dennett had a personal interest in painless childbirth. Its mission was to encourage the use of all safe procedures that provided pain free childbirth to all women who wanted it.\textsuperscript{144} To that end, they developed a resource list of doctors and hospitals that used Twilight Sleep, published material about the practice, supplied speakers to organizations and raised money to build a twilight sleep teaching hospital.\textsuperscript{145} Tracy and Boyd noted that to their knowledge it was the first time in history that patients began to dictate their own treatment preferences to their doctors.\textsuperscript{146} The notion of female empowerment was consistent with Dennett’s growing confidence and strength.

Feminists of the early twentieth century wanted the autonomy to decide how they experienced childbirth. At the time, that meant the option to use Twilight Sleep. In contrast to the type of control early feminists advocated, recent feminists of the 1960s and 1970s fought against ceding responsibility to their doctors in a way that left them disengaged from the experience of labor and delivery. They wanted to play an active role

\textsuperscript{143} Tracy, \textit{Painless Childbirth}, 1915, xxxi.


\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{146} Tracy, \textit{Painless Childbirth}, 1915, xxxiii.
in the process and fought for the right to experience childbirth completely, including the
pain that early feminists wanted the right to escape.\textsuperscript{147}

At first glance, the two movements may appear counterintuitive to the
foundational principles of feminism. Both movements, however, were about autonomy
and choice for the mother and each reflected the historical context of its time. Dennett’s
interest and enthusiasm for Twilight Sleep was consistent with her belief in knowledge
for all, individual freedom, responsibility and personal agency.

\textbf{Summary}

Dennett resigned from The Boston Society of Arts and Crafts in 1904 and The
National American Woman’s Suffrage Association in 1914 for similar reasons. Both
organizations had a narrow mission and thus were limited in the effect they could have.
They did not address the systemic changes Dennett viewed as necessary. Dennett wanted
to work for organizations concerned with economic democracy and the redistribution of
power and wealth.

As a social activist, Dennett tried to identify the underlying cause of a problem.
Her pattern of work suggests that she was dissatisfied with working on just the symptom.
Dennett believed that if the underlying issues were not addressed, the problem would
recur. For example, she became bored with the suffrage movement because it remained
focused on the narrow definition of suffrage. She wanted NAWSA to address all the
“issues related to democracy and citizenship, all the forms of radicalism which have any

\textsuperscript{147} Judith Walzer Leavitt, “Birthing and Anesthesia: The Debate Over Twilight Sleep,” \textit{Journal of
Women in Culture and Society, Women Sex and Sexuality, Part 2} (University of Chicago Press) 6, no. 1
(Autumn 1980), 148.
connection with citizenship and personal freedom.”148 She was one of the new women in the NYC-WPP who connected war with broader social issues and was far more provocative in her political actions than the WPP.149 Dennett looked at the Peace Movement as an international movement. In response to the rampant xenophobia around her Dennett said, “My country is the world, my countrymen are all mankind.”150

Dennett’s social activism during the ten years between 1908 and 1918 was pivotal to her development as a fully engaged woman in the public arena. In 1908, she emerged from the reproductive sphere, where her primary role was that of wife and mother, and entered into the productive sphere, where her principal responsibility was that of provider. In 1908, Dennett was a deeply troubled and vulnerable young woman of 36 who had tolerated her husband’s philandering with the misguided hope that his affection for her would eventually prevail. It did not. By the time she published The Sex Side of Life, however, Dennett was the quintessential new woman, no longer as tightly bound to the Victorian ideal of the true woman.

Beginning in 1908 Dennett worked in well over a dozen social reform organizations where she built upon the solid foundation of skills she already possessed. She developed into an extremely accomplished, capable and formidable woman. From her work with the Massachusetts and National Suffrage Associations, Dennett learned to organize meetings and campaigns, speak to a crowd, write speeches and articles and how to navigate her way around large organizations. From Alice Paul, she learned the

148 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Anna Shaw" (MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 211, August 17, 1912), 12.


150 Chen, Dennett, 1996, 168.
importance of Federal legislation. In Heterodoxy, she developed close friendships and self-confidence. It was a place where she could explore gender-based political issues with other women who were similarly predisposed. In the Twilight Sleep Association, she learned about the medical profession and its intransigence.

Like other new women of the early twentieth century, Dennett explored issues related to sexuality. Chapter Six is about her involvement with birth control and sex education within the historical context in which she lived. Additionally, the connection between Dennett’s desires to address broad based social issues and her publication of the Sex Side of Life is examined.
CHAPTER VI: WOMEN, SEXUALITY, BIRTH CONTROL AND SEX EDUCATION

Introduction

As the nation transitioned from an agrarian to an industrial society, changes occurred in virtually every aspect of American life. The role of women shifted dramatically as did attitudes about sexuality, birth control and sex education. Dennett went through her own transformation right along with the social, political and economic changes of her time. She changed in part because of the historical context in which she lived, but also because of who she was, her personal experiences, organizational work and the needs of her sons.

During the twenty years immediately preceding and following the start of the twentieth century, women took advantage of new opportunities in the roles and responsibilities available to them.¹ The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) published a calendar in 1912 (See Illustration 5) in which they proclaimed, “The greatest achievement of the woman movement within the last century, was the personal liberty that is now conceded to women, the liberty to do, to say, to go and to be what one pleases, which has come to woman.”² NAWSA announced that seeing women going to and from work, on the same streets where they were once viewed with suspicion, was now a commonplace occurrence.³

¹ Matthews, Women’s Struggle, 1997, 4.
Furthermore, NAWSA reported that nearly two million women left the restrictions of domestic life to participate in any number of women’s organizations in the public arena, indicating that the new woman was emerging from the cult of true womanhood, to learn new skills and to participate in the shaping of society, in greater and greater numbers. The General Federation of Women’s Clubs was formed in 1892 with approximately 100,000 members. By 1910, the membership had soared to almost one million and by 1912, only two years later, membership doubled to nearly two million.

Southern white women, however, continued to object to African American women joining associations where they belonged. In response, African American women created their own federation in 1895, The National Association of Colored Women. While progress had surely been made, freeing women from the confines of home as the 1912 NAWSA calendar proclaimed, separate spheres remained the normative structure in which white women of a certain class lived. For Dennett, as well

---

4 Ibid., 5: Southern women objected to African Americans participating in NAWSA and NAWSA capitulated to their demands.

5 Ibid., 16.
as for African American and working women, the middle and upper class privilege that allowed some women to stay at home was not an option.

*True womanhood* as popularized in the 1830s by ministers, social conservatives and Ladies periodicals developed concurrently with industrial capitalism, defining middle-class women as maternal, domestic and compliant. For middle-class women, their role shifted from the productive sphere to that of homemaker. They were charged with teaching children about the behaviors and appearances associated with newly emerging middle-class life, and creating a relaxing and attractive retreat for the family wage earner. In general, as opportunities for middle class men increased, those for middle-class women decreased.

In the midst of the Sturm und Drang of industrialization, shifting gender roles and sexuality, Dennett was developing a personal and public response to the systemic changes in American life. On a personal level, she was undoubtedly concerned about her two sons’ entrance into puberty and preparing them for a productive life. Additionally, Dennett needed income to support her family, and she wanted to be involved in meaningful work that addressed the basic principles of a democratic community.

---


8 Griffith, *In Her Own Right*, 1984, 15.
This chapter examines the historical context in which Dennett’s political, social and economic views flourished, her continued move away from the domestic sphere and how she addressed her son’s budding adolescent sexuality. Furthermore, the chapter contains an examination of Dennett’s most significant contributions to building a democratic society – reproductive freedom and a healthy and honest approach towards sex education.

The Historical Context

The rise of industrial capitalism drove the need for increasingly large numbers of new and cheap immigrant laborers, leading to aggressive foreign recruitment strategies. Labor became an article of trade for the first time, just like other commodities. In 1790, the American population included 500,000 foreign born, but by 1870, the population of first generation immigrants surpassed 5,500,000. Unease about preserving the cultural heritage of the nation spiraled upward with the influx of immigrants. Nativist and anti-Catholic sentiment burgeoned throughout the country, in both rural and urban areas. By 1880, half of America’s immigrants spoke English, but half of those immigrants were Irish-Catholic, in a country where widespread anti-papist fears flourished. Reacting

---

9 According to Katz, “The most important development in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was not industry or urbanism but the spread of capitalism.” Michael B. Katz, Reconstructing American Education (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 13; Griffith, In Her Own Right, 1984, 3.

against immigrant culture, Nativists sought to exert social control over their behavior by enacting laws to eradicate public drinking and disorderly conduct.\textsuperscript{11}

Comparatively inexpensive factory goods became available to the working class for the first time because of the efficiencies associated with the mass production of merchandise. Farmers recognized the need for cash in order to participate in the new consumerism. They joined the ranks of merchant capitalists as they attempted to work their farms like a business, converting sustainable farms into farms growing cash crops.\textsuperscript{12} When their cash crops failed, they too sought work in the nation’s cities.

Crowding and unsafe living conditions resulted when both farmers and newly arriving immigrants flocked to the nation’s urban areas searching for jobs.\textsuperscript{13} In the North, towns and villages quickly developed into cities, while the South remained rural with its legacy of slave labor and plantation economy.\textsuperscript{14} Crime swept through the newly developing cities as Nativism and poverty increased in tandem and resentment grew over the disparity between rich and poor.\textsuperscript{15} The setting was ripe for the rise of the Eugenics movement.

\textbf{Eugenics}

During the 1900s, the eugenics movement was so pervasive and so entangled with mainstream birth control strategy that many scholars were not aware of exceptions to that


\textsuperscript{12} Hofstadter, \textit{Reform}, 1965, 36-39.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 32. 32.

\textsuperscript{14} D'Emilio, \textit{Intimate Matters}, 1997, 57.

entanglement. Mary Ware Dennett, educator, artist, mother, reformer and tireless advocate for individual freedom and education was one of the early birth control advocates who appears to have shunned the eugenics movement. Dennett was a civil libertarian, who believed that in a democratic society individuals had the right, the responsibility and the privilege to make their own decisions. That belief in individual agency is a theme that ran throughout her life and it supplies a theoretical framework for Dennett’s apparent disinterest in eugenics.

In contrast to Dennett’s civil libertarian views, eugenicists did not support individual agency. Instead, they focused on their particular brand of the collective good. The eugenicist’s version of the collective good was biased, favoring the reproduction of those on top of the social hierarchy, of which they were members. Many did not support birth control, believing that the unfit might use it incorrectly and continue to procreate at a faster rate than the dominant culture. Instead, they supported involuntary sterilization. While some did not support birth control due to fear of who would reproduce, others did not support birth control out of fear of who would fail to reproduce.

Because American born middle and upper class white educated Protestant women began to have fewer children, concern for what was called “racial suicide” grew among the elite. The personal decision to have fewer children by a select group of white women was labeled selfish. Decreased birth rates among native-born whites

---

substantiated ethnocentric fears about race suicide. American Eugenics was based on the philosophy and theoretical framework of Englishmen, Thomas Robert Malthus, Francis Galton and American born, Herbert Spencer. The United States, became the “pioneer of state-sanctioned programs to rid society of the ‘unfit.’” In 1907, Indiana passed the very first sterilization law in history. Between 1907 and 1927, doctors forcibly sterilized 8,500 Americans. The goal was to identify, trace and finally to eradicate faulty gene pools by means of sterilization.

American eugenicists like Sanger focused on *negative eugenics*, which discouraged the least able or *unfit* from breeding rather than *positive eugenics*, which advocated for the selective breeding of the most able, that is, the white middle or upper class Protestant Americans of Western European descent.

**Selling Sex**

The Civil War helped to expand the public spaces in which sexual commerce could flourish. More than three million men left their families to fight in the war, creating a ready market of customers for hawkers of erotic materials to target. In the post Civil War era, the demand for pornographic materials, burlesque shows and other salacious activities continued to thrive and beginning in the late nineteenth century,

---


19 The phrase *sexual commerce* is borrowed from D'Emlio, *Intimate Matters*, 1997, 130, 131. The phrase is especially appealing and useful because in only two words it includes a host of activities associated with sexuality including but not limited to prostitution, peep shows, burlesque and pornography.

prostitutes became readily available. They were in brothels, dance halls and houses of assignation. They could be found in seaport towns and cities. Wherever single men gathered, a willing market for sexual commerce grew.\textsuperscript{21}

Concurrently, higher literacy rates, additional leisure time and more disposable income made it possible for a growing number of men to indulge in leisure activities associated with erotica. The ability to meet the growing market for pornography also grew. Advances in printing, papermaking and photographic technology made the manufacture of printed materials more economical, benefitting producers of erotica as well as newspapers and magazines. In 1801 approximately 200 newspapers, including 20 dailies existed, and by 1833 the number rose to about 1200 and 65 respectively. By 1870, some 5,871 newspapers, including 574 dailies of every type and variety competed for the public’s attention.\textsuperscript{22} Combining advances in manufacturing with improvements to the federal postal system, the production and distribution of pornography became more profitable and visible than ever before.\textsuperscript{23}

**Birth Control**

**Before Criminalization**

Before 1873, specific legislation about birth control did not exist.\textsuperscript{24} In fact, Americans have used an assortment of methods to limit reproduction since Colonial


\textsuperscript{23} D’Emlio, *Intimate Matters*, 1997, 130; Note: Cremin did not write about the growth of pornographic materials, only about the growth of the newspaper industry and the reasons for the increase.

times. Although a taboo subject in Victorian America, birth control information and devices were readily available in the nineteenth century and especially so between the 1830s and 1870s. Information spread through word of mouth, advertisements in newspapers, lectures and marriage guides.

Robert Dale Owen (1801-1877) wrote and published the marriage guide, *Moral Philosophy, or a Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question* in 1831. It was the first credible book published in the United States to include arguments for birth control and offering practical information. Remaining in print until 1871, *Moral Philosophy* included Owen’s thoughts on several important issues of the day, including sexuality and overpopulation as well as birth control. He was an advocate for reproductive freedom. He believed that a couple’s personal circumstances and desires should allow them to “refrain at will from becoming parents” which made it easier for parents to educate and care for their children.

Owen considered celibacy impractical as a method to control reproduction and suggested withdrawal instead. Only as a footnote did he mention syringes and the French

27 Ibid., 38.
31 The first edition was published in 1831, but the edition number of the 1842 version is unclear. Robert Dale Owen, *Moral Physiology; or a Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question* (London: J. Watson, 1842), 36.
baudrache, or condom, but he did not recommend either. Owen thought that nineteenth
century poverty was caused by monopolies, competition and greed, not overpopulation as
Malthus warned and he believed that sex for pleasure as well as reproduction was a
justified activity.32 Owen and his book influenced Dr. Charles Knowlton (1800-1850).33

After reading *Moral Philosophy*, Knowlton was inspired to write his own
marriage guide.34 He wrote *Fruits of Philosophy; or the Private Companion of Young
Married People* in 1832 and it remained in print until the tenth edition was published in
1877.35 In *Fruits of Philosophy*, Knowlton acknowledged the reproductive instinct as a
natural desire for gratification and enjoyment. After a thorough review of male and
female anatomy, he discussed the relative merits and effectiveness of several birth control
methods before recommending postcoital vaginal douching.36 Norman E. Himes framed
Owen and Knowlton as “having the honor” of being the two founders of the American
birth control movement.37

Dr. Frederick Hollick’s *The Marriage Guide* was published in 1850. It was so
well received that by 1875 it began its three hundredth edition.38 In addition to marriage

---

32 Owen, *Moral Physiology*, 1842, 9, 10, 19, 22, 36, 38, 39.

33 Sripati Chandraesekhar, ed., *Reproductive Physiology and Birth Control*, *The Writings of Charles

34 John Reed, *From Private to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society Since


37 Ibid., vi.

guides, lectures and word of mouth, improvements in the manufacturing of birth control devices made birth control available to greater numbers of couples in the mid nineteenth century. For example, in 1846, a diaphragm was patented with the name, “A Wife’s Protector.” The proliferation of newspapers and magazines helped to advertise contraceptive devices. Probably the most significant improvement occurred with Goodyear’s vulcanization process.

Charles Goodyear (1800-1860) invented vulcanization, a process that was perfect for manufacturing condoms and diaphragms in 1839. The procedure changed rubber into a stable, waterproof, durable and malleable substance, resistant to changes in temperature. By the 1850s, condoms as well as diaphragms were commonly available and ads appeared in newspapers and magazines, thinly veiled with terms like female hygiene and protection for over childbearing. It took ten years for condoms to became a profitable industry at which point they became commercially visible. The availability of contraceptive devices and information, particularly between the 1830s and 1870s, in combination with declining birth rates for white middle and upper class white women suggests that those that could afford to practice family limitation did so.

39 Ibid.

40 Goodyear was the son of an inventor and the seventh inventor in four generations of Goodyear’s. Harold Evans, They Made America, From the Steam Engine to the Search Engine, Two Centuries of Inventors (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2004), 94.


For white families of privilege, birth rates decreased sharply, from 7.04 per couple in 1800, down to 3.56 in 1900.\footnote{D'Emilio, \textit{Intimate Matters}, 1997, 59; Tone, “Black Market Birth Control,” 2000, 3, 4.} (See Chart 3) In contrast, the birth rate among African American women and first generation immigrant families remained high until the late nineteenth century.\footnote{Ibid., 58, 65.} The use of various forms of contraceptive devices and practices – including extended breast-feeding, abortion and in pre-industrial times infanticide –helps to explain smaller families among the white middle and upper classes.\footnote{Infanticide was still common in the mid nineteenth century in the US. Gordon, \textit{The Moral Property of Women}, 2007, 14, 15, 24.}

Records kept by the Society of Friends in Philadelphia, indicate a considerable reduction in the birth rate of Quakers in the mid nineteenth-century. Furthermore, evidence exists that syringes commonly used for contraception were widely available in heavily Quaker Philadelphia. Combining the reduced birth rate with the availability of contraceptive syringes suggests the use of birth control devices by the Quakers of Philadelphia.\footnote{D'Emilio, \textit{Intimate Matters}, 1997, 47, 48.}

\phantomsection
\addcontentsline{toc}{subsection}{Chart 3: Birth Rates}
It appears that Dennett’s parents, Livonia and George Ware, used some method of birth control as well. Livonia and George were married for five years before their first child William Bradford was born in 1870. The birth of three more children followed at regular intervals, indicating that fertility was not the issue. Mary was born two years after William in 1872, followed by Richard in 1873 (died in infancy) and Clara two years after that in 1875. The Wares had no additional children. In 1875, Livonia was just 32, still well within the parameter of prime childbearing years. It is quite possible that the Wares learned about birth control from one of the marriage guides in circulation during the mid nineteenth century.47

Evidence of widespread abortion use shows a determined effort to limit family size and surely contributed to declining birth rates.48 An anti-abortion campaign during the 1840s led mainly by doctors signaled the first politicized American movement related to reproductive freedom. Motivated by perceived threats from midwives and the popular health movement, doctors used the rejection of abortion as a tool to eliminate the competition. Although previously legal and widespread, by 1880 every state enacted anti-Abortion laws.49

The availability and use of birth control devices and marriage guides, along with pornographic materials grew, bringing sexuality, a hitherto private affair, into the public arena. The social landscape changed considerably. Young men, new to city life and

47 Chen, Dennett, 1996, 10.
separated from family and community restraint, could indulge in city pleasures.\textsuperscript{50} They bought erotica, gambled and went to saloons and dance halls, shielded by the anonymity of urban life.

Social conservatives were deeply disturbed by the unacceptable behavior that young men publicly displayed. In fact, they were in a kind of moral panic. They believed that sexual restraint and control led to “work, industry, good habits, piety and noble ideals.” Without sexual repression, it was thought that men would not be wholesome, thrifty, hard working and moderate in nature, all qualities that were very much valued in late nineteenth and early twentieth century society.\textsuperscript{51} Overpopulation was not an issue in nineteenth-century America, but the notion of overpopulation by a certain class, race or ethnic group strongly resonated with many white American Protestants.\textsuperscript{52} Combined with the declining birth rate of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, the demand for lawmakers to legislate against pornography and birth control grew.\textsuperscript{53}

Anti-vice crusaders believed that women, isolated at home in the reproductive sphere and away from the negative effects of industry, provided the necessary moral compass to ease industrialization’s ill effects.\textsuperscript{54} Adherents to the “separate spheres” approach to feminism also framed women as morally superior to men. The separate

\textsuperscript{50} Reed, \textit{Private to Public Virtue}, 1978, 20.

\textsuperscript{51} Strong, “Early Sex Education Movement,” 1972, 130.


\textsuperscript{54} D’Emilio, \textit{Intimate Matters}, 1997, 146, 147.
spheres idea was about fighting for a particular issue outside the home without advocating for systemic changes within the gender-based construction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was about venturing into the public sphere to save the world from immoral behavior, then returning to home and hearth. Both groups, anti-vice crusaders and separate sphere feminists, could not abide contraception. For separate spheres women, endorsing contraception would mean they approved of sex for pleasure, rather than exclusively for procreation. Sanctioning sex for pleasure contradicted their stance about women’s moral superiority over men. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) is a good example of the separate spheres movement. WCTU women believed it was their mission to extend their moral influence outside of the family and stamp out alcohol in the public sphere. By eliminating liquor, women of the WCTU believed they could preserve the sanctity of the family and in turn preserve the “moral fabric of society.”

Elizabeth Cady Stanton did not support the separate spheres movement, but she alluded to the moral superiority of women. She believed that the “chords of sympathy” available to women could “touch more skillfully than man.” Cady Stanton did not think that man could “redeem his race” without woman’s help. She too voiced concerns about moral purity and “the tide of vice” sweeping the cities, warning that the defenders of piety were weak against the “raging elements of sin and death.”

Dennett expressed a similar concern. She was troubled over the “smutty literature and inducements to sex


perversion” that threatened to pollute young people.\textsuperscript{57} It does not appear, however, that Dennett believed in women’s moral superiority over men or supported the separate sphere concept.

In cities, young men had access to pornographic materials with little or no oversight. Unsanctioned amusements flourished in urban areas that were not bound by the restraint of a “community moral code” provided by family, church and a close-knit society.\textsuperscript{58} Urban areas, therefore, became a prime target for anti-vice societies.\textsuperscript{59} Many former abolitionists exerted their considerable reform experience and energy towards eliminating commercial erotica and birth control to make American cities safe for middle and upper class white families.\textsuperscript{60} Anthony Comstock (1844-1915) was not an abolitionist, but he was undoubtedly the most zealous advocate for social purity.

\textbf{Criminalization}

Anthony Comstock, America’s foremost prude and crusader against the moral decadence of the gilded age and Mary Ware Dennett, civil libertarian and social activist were each other’s nemesis.\textsuperscript{61} While Comstock dedicated his life to restricting access to information, Dennett dedicated hers to expanding access. Comstock had a profound impact on Dennett’s life and ultimately, he defined the place she holds in history. It was

\textsuperscript{57} Dennett, \textit{Birth Control Laws}, 1926, 19.

\textsuperscript{58} Boyer, \textit{Purity in Print}, 1968, 3.

\textsuperscript{59} Lee Ann Wheeler, \textit{Against Obscenity, Reform and the Politics of Womanhood in America, 1873-1935} (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 9, 10.

\textsuperscript{60} Reed, \textit{Private to Public Virtue}, 1978, 34.

the Comstock Obscenity Law of 1873 that led to Dennett’s arrest for distributing *The Sex Side of Life* through the US mail in 1929.

The rise of industrial capitalism, coupled with the growth of large cities and the influx of immigrants, presented tremendous obstacles to white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who wanted to maintain a Christian nation and their position within it. From the nation’s Puritan past to the start of the Civil War, Protestant Americans were supported in their hegemonic beliefs by a nation who had a close association with a Protestant god and to Puritan culture. With the growth of vast fortunes, crowded cities with different religions and few churches for the urban poor, hopes of maintaining their position on top of the social hierarchy and saving the country from *paganism* were threatened.62

The anti-vice movement, of which Comstock was its most enthusiastic member, developed in response to the post Civil War environment in which cities teemed with immigrants and young men, indulging in sexual commerce and other activities frowned upon by anti-vice crusaders. Furthermore, members of the anti-vice movement were concerned about the use of contraceptives and their contribution to promoting sins of the *flesh* as well as race suicide. (See Chart 3 to view the birthrate decline of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants.) Anti-Vice crusaders objected to contraception for a number of reasons, primarily religious. They were evangelicals of the second great awakening who demanded strict adherence to traditional sexual mores.63 Evangelical ministers raged against lust, viewing sexual indulgence as a deadly sin.64

---


63 Evangelicals of the second great awakening – the early nineteenth-century religious revival – eschewed the doctrine of preordained salvation by God. Evangelicals created Tract Societies whose sole purpose lay in promoting. “The interests of vital godliness and good morals, by the distribution of such
Anthony Comstock was the quintessential anti-vice crusader who based his sanctimonious objection to sexuality of any kind on the Evangelical Christian belief system of his childhood in rural Connecticut. New Canaan carried out the widespread New England practice of community oversight to reinforce traditional morality. Although the mother who he adored died when he was only ten, Comstock never turned away from the Evangelical Christianity of his youth. His education was sporadic and as a teenager, he felt “obliged” to leave school to clerk in a country store.

Some of the circumstances of Comstock’s childhood are not entirely clear. According to Lefkowitz Horowitz, Comstock came from a hardscrabble life on a small farm, but according to Beisel, the “small farm” consisted of 160 acres. The farm, as well as the two sawmills owned by Comstock’s father were quite prosperous according to Beisel and employed as many as thirty men. Long agrees with Beisel and describes Comstock as part of the landed gentry whose parents were direct descendents of the first American Puritans. Regardless of the material wealth of Comstock’s family, he was raised in an emotionally austere environment characterized by Bible study and “tales of moral outrage.”

---


65 Ibid., 6, 11.


After Comstock’s brother died at Gettysburg, Comstock enlisted in the army to take his brother’s place. During his time away, a series of business reversals caused his father to lose the farm. Comstock experienced little temptation in the sober countryside of his youth in Connecticut, but life was quite different when he joined the 17th Connecticut. His sheltered life was over.

Writing about his experience, he said: “As we entered the barracks, a feeling of sadness came over me and it seems as though I should sink when I heard the air resounding with the oaths of wicked men.” Comstock was not popular among the soldiers in Florida where he was stationed. He refused to either drink or share the rations of whiskey he received. Instead, he poured the liquor on the ground, right in front of the other soldiers. Furthermore, Comstock organized prayer meetings and arranged for preachers to visit. Comstock’s peers ridiculed him. His popularity did not improve when he moved to New York.

Evangelicals established the first Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in 1852 to offer opportunities for “moral” recreational activities to the newly arriving men in New York. At the start of the Civil War, however, the YMCA shifted its activities to protect the character and virtue of soldiers in the war. They began the Christian Commission and provided ministers, bibles, blankets, Christian reading material and

---


respectable books for the soldiers to read as an antidote to the erotica being sent to them from publishers.\textsuperscript{72} Comstock volunteered to work for the Christian Commission.

To promote their anti-vice agenda, moral crusaders used rhetoric that spoke to the most fundamental desires parents have for their children – the ability to exceed, or at least to meet the same level of social and economic privilege enjoyed by the previous generation.”\textsuperscript{73} Comstock and other anti-vice crusaders gained credibility and traction by claiming the vices they worked to suppress threatened the lives of children.\textsuperscript{74}

Comstock claimed knowledge about the myriad ways by which a child could be corrupted. He saw childhood as a tabula rasa, a time of complete innocence, when children could be influenced by either good or evil. Comstock viewed sexuality as the “Spirit of Evil,” an external force that threatened a child’s purity. He did not recognize puberty as a developmental stage in the maturation process. Instead, he saw children as empty vessels, vulnerable to either moral or immoral influences. Thus, Comstock believed any public manifestations of sexuality must be censored for the sake of the children.\textsuperscript{75} His vocation was to “arouse a public sentiment against the vampires who are

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 6.


\textsuperscript{74} Beisel, \textit{Imperiled Innocents}, 1997, 4, 9, 11.

\textsuperscript{75} Moran, \textit{Teaching Sex}, 2001, 29, 6.
casting deadly poison into the fountain of moral purity in the children."76 It was an effective strategy followed by the majority of successful moral reform crusaders.77

As a result, the anti-obscenity legislation proposed by Anthony Comstock, in which he linked the rise of obscenity to the corruption of children, passed easily in 1873, just one year after Dennett was born.78 Comstock addressed the members of Congress in 1873 and showed them “specimens of the disgusting pictures and publications which were then in circulation.”79 After Comstock explained the revolting fact that the material was being spread to the youth of the nation, Congress immediately passed the bill.80

Comstock helped to enforce the Victorian code of silence, a view that kept every reference about sexuality or bodily functions unsaid. They were considered vulgar and therefore, must be censored. Comstock viewed sex for pleasure as selfish and as an expression of the sordid impulses of humanity. He believed that lust must be controlled.81

Anti-vice crusaders like Comstock objected to sexuality education, pornography and birth control.82 New York grand juries reflected similar concerns about sex for enjoyment, specifically as sexual pleasure related to women. Between 1842 and the onset of the Civil War, the grand juries identified twenty books as obscene and the identified

76 Anthony Comstock, *Freuds Exposed or How the People Are Deceived and Robbed, and Youth Corrupted*, 2 ed. (1880) (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2009), 5.


80 Ibid.


passages usually centered on female passion and desire.\footnote{83} In 1873, the federal law for the

\textit{Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use} Act also banned the exchange of information about birth control and birth control devices through the mail in its long list of outlawed items and subjects.\footnote{84}

\section*{After Criminalization}

The Comstock Obscenity law of 1873 stated that it was illegal to send through the mail:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Every obscene, lewd or lascivious, and every filthy book, pamphlet, picture, paper, letter, writing, print or other publication of an indecent character, and every article or thing designed, adapted, or intended for preventing conception, producing abortion, for any indecent or immoral use.}\footnote{85}
\end{quote}

The Law banned birth control, among other things, but it did not rid the nation of birth control knowledge. Because information about birth control was so widespread before criminalization, it was difficult to suppress entirely. Couples, therefore, continued to use condoms, pessaries, sponges, withdrawal, abortifacients, and other folklore methods to limit childbirth, even after criminalization. The ban changed acceptable behavior into criminal behavior. In doing so, it increased the cost to users, and decreased the quality.\footnote{86}

\footnote{83} Dennis, "Obscenity Law" 2007, 2.
\footnote{85} Dennett, \textit{Birth Control Laws}, 1926. 9.
\footnote{86} Gordon, \textit{The Moral Property}, 2007, 13, 15, 26, 22.
**Words in Pearl for the Married** by Edward Bliss Foote was one of the first pamphlets to clash with Comstock’s Obscenity Laws. Foote was a strong advocate for contraception and included an overview of birth control methods in the pamphlet. He was arrested in 1876, convicted in the U.S. District Court of New York, and fined $3,000. After Foote’s 1876 conviction, American birth control went underground.87 Breaking the code of silence had serious ramifications.

Victoria Woodhull (1838-1927) and her sister Tennessee Claflin (1845-1923) believed that marriage sexually enslaved women. They publicly advocated free love. While that view was somewhat tolerated in New York in the 1870s, breaking the code of silence was not. Averse to hypocrisy, Woodhull and Claflin exposed a sex scandal involving the well respected and prominent Evangelical minister Henry Ward Beecher. After publishing the details in *Woodhull’s and Claflin’s Weekly*, Comstock had them arrested and imprisoned. It was 1872. All of New York’s respectable society joined Comstock in condemning them because Woodhull and Claflin broke the conspiracy of silence.88

Comstock was unable to get Woodhull and Claflin convicted because of a legal technicality. By 1873, however, he had gained enough publicity and support to begin his long career as America’s moral watchdog. Together with his wealthy and prominent supporters, Comstock was able to make fundamental changes to the nation’s sexual culture.89


Madame Restell, also known as Ann Lohman, was Comstock’s most celebrated victim. She emigrated from England and began to perform abortions in the early 1830s in New York City. Restell was flamboyant, charismatic and catered to the rich. She built her business by advertising extensively, opening branch offices and hiring traveling sales representatives. In 1871 alone, she was reported to have spent $60,000 on advertising. Restell lived in a four-story mansion on New York’s tony Fifth Avenue, a testimony to the widespread use of abortion by upper-middle and upper class women of New York. Restell’s ostentatious show of her success must have been to Comstock like a red flag is to a bull.

In 1878, Comstock went to Restell’s office and told her he needed birth control for his wife, at which point he promptly arrested her. In reports about her arrest, it was estimated that her fortune was worth $1.5 million dollars, further testimony to the extent of her services to New York women. On the day Restell was expected in court, she was found in her home with her throat slit, the result of an apparent suicide. Restell’s suicide, widely attributed to Comstock’s unrelenting pursuit of her, signaled the end of benign neglect towards abortion.

---


92 Mohr, *Abortion in America*, 1979, 46, 47, 199.

93 Ibid.
Comstock was a relentless and uncompromising anti-vice crusader, who used any means at his disposal to arrest and convict his targets. His crusade for moral reform, regulating and controlling sexual materials and birth control devices and information lasted for nearly a century – beginning just after the Civil War and continuing well beyond his death in 1915. Dennett spent many years in the birth control and sex education movements fighting to amend the Obscenity Law that bears his name.

**Dennett: Birth Control and Sex Education**

**Early Birth Control Interest**

One Saturday in 1914, Margaret Sanger spoke at a regular meeting of the radical feminists of Heterodoxy. According to Judith Schwarz, Sanger complained that she “struck no responsive chord” with the Heterodites and Sanger was angry with them for not being more enthusiastic about birth control. Dennett, however, was enthusiastic about birth control and evidence of her interest first appeared in 1912. In a letter dated April 17, 1912, Dennett listed the three elements she considered necessary for an ideal life: Economic independence for women, the end of every type of privilege, and knowledge about safe methods of birth control. Furthermore, Dennett was sufficiently

---


96 Dennett, “Letter to the Freewoman,” April 17, 1912.
enthusiastic about birth control to invite Sanger to lunch after she spoke at Heterodoxy so that she could learn more about birth control.97

Dennett’s ability to separate sex from reproduction, as evidenced by her approval of birth control, was an implicit endorsement of sex for pleasure. It is not completely clear what her views about sex were while she was married to Hartley, but we know that both she and Hartley were woefully ignorant about birth control methods. The doctors warned that another pregnancy could cause Dennett’s death, and so they practiced abstinence.

The facts suggest that one reason Hartley abandoned Dennett was because they no longer could have sex. Both were fearful of Dennett becoming pregnant. With Hartley’s departure, Dennett experienced first-hand the central role of sexuality in a couple’s relationship and the ramifications if sex was not possible. Dennett’s involvement with the birth control and sex education movements indicate that she became far more knowledgeable and comfortable with sexuality as she matured. In 1915, she publicly spoke about the value of a sexual relationship at the meeting that organized the National Birth Control League. Dennett said that “there has been a wonderful evolution that is perfectly logical, natural and desirable” about “the sex relation” that is not about having children.98 Dennett’s embrace of sexuality, birth control and sex education is significant because it establishes her keen interest in ideas and values that specifically relate to her ability to publish *The Sex Side of Life*. It is clear that Dennett’s personal approach to sexuality evolved as well as that of the public’s.

---


98 Mary Ware Dennett, "Speech at the Meeting Which Organized The National Birth Control League" (MWD Papers, Reel 13, March 1915).
In 1914, Margaret Sanger was in Europe fleeing an indictment for sending *The Woman Rebel* through the mail. Sanger was the editor, circulation director, treasurer and bookkeeper of *The Woman Rebel*, a paper that lasted a mere eight issues. The contents did not include specific information about contraception. Instead, it included articles about the cost of raising a family, the prevalence of abortion, the safety of using contraceptives and an essay that justified the assassination of government officials under certain circumstances. In August of 1914, Sanger was indicted for violating nine counts of section 211 of the Comstock Law of 1873.99

While Sanger was in Europe, her estranged husband, William Sanger (1873-1961) was arrested in New York City for distributing a pamphlet written by his wife about birth control.100 Titled *Family Limitation*, it offered specific information about birth control and birth control devices, complete with diagrams. After a young man visited him to request information about contraception, William offered him a copy of the pamphlet. The young man worked for Comstock and an hour later, he returned with Comstock who arrested William for distributing obscene materials.101

William’s arrest and subsequent trial became a cause célèbre for New York radicals and free speech supporters. William defended himself quite admirably and eloquently. After the judge sentenced him to 30 days in jail or a $150 fine, he proclaimed: “I would rather be in jail with my conviction than be free at a loss of my manhood and


my self respect.” Dennett joined other reformers to raise funds for William’s legal defense. In the process, Dennett rekindled her interest in birth control issues and the repeal of the Comstock Law.

In 1915, Dennett was 43, Carleton was a teenager of 14 and Devon was 10. Both boys were still attending school in Massachusetts and Dennett continued to live in New York City, working and remaining socially and politically active. In 1915, just one year after resigning from the National American Woman Suffrage Association, she wrote The Sex Side of Life for her boys, and together with Jessie Ashley and Clara Gruening Stillman, she founded The National Birth Control League (NBCL), the first birth control organization in the nation. Dennett led the NBCL from 1915-1918. In 1915, she also helped to organize The Twilight Sleep Association, a method of painless childbirth that originated in Germany. Dennett was quite busy in 1915.

**The National Birth Control League**

While Sanger was in Europe, the radical men and women of New York became more interested in birth control and their interest turned into action. Dennett thought both Sangers contributed to the increased commitment to address the issue of contraception. Margaret Sanger’s “gallant zeal” about birth control was instrumental in raising awareness about the significance of contraception and William Sanger’s arrest galvanized people into action. Hence, a meeting was held in March 1915 at Clara Gruening

---


Stillman’s home to address the issue. That night in 1915, The National Birth Control League (NBCL) was formed. Dennett, Gruening Stillman and Dennett’s friend Jessie Ashley led the initiative.

Dennett gave a stirring speech at the gathering. Admitting to differences within the group of men and women who attended the meeting, she nonetheless focused on the core issue – the right of each individual to have access to accurate birth control information. Although our strategies may differ, she said, we all agree on one very important point. We concur on the absolute necessity for all people to have scientifically accurate information about birth control and access to birth control devices. I am encouraged she continued, to see that diverse groups of people share the same view – “from the most cramped conservative to the freest radical.”

The mission of the NBCL was to repeal or amend all state laws that limited or prohibited the exchange of information about birth control to prevent conception and to collect and disseminate information about the legal status of birth control education. To that end, they began a lobbying campaign in Albany to revise New York’s anti-birth control legislation. New York’s Little Comstock Law included birth control information and devices in its outlawed list of obscene materials just like federal statutes.

---


Dennett was a tireless supporter of the free exchange of information and that theme surfaced in her birth control strategy as well as her other reform work. She spent several years trying to make birth control information and sex education available to all. Dennett wanted women to have legal access to birth control by removing all references to birth control devices and information, cleanly and completely, from the obscenity law, thereby making it legal to share birth control information and to provide sex education. In contrast, Margaret Sanger proposed a bill that would make birth control available exclusively through physicians. Dennett and her colleagues in the NBCL viewed that approach as elitist and labeled it a medical monopoly of knowledge.

In a letter to potential supporters of the NBCL dated December 16, 1918, Dennett expanded her views about the critical importance of sound, scientifically accurate information. She acknowledged that most people had some information about contraception, but most of that information she believed was incomplete and inaccurate. Dennett considered wrong information more harmful than no information at all. Without accurate information taught in medical schools and “given out to all hospitals, clinics and dispensaries,” women and families will continue to suffer through unwanted pregnancies and unwanted children. Dennett said birth control information must be disbursed through “all the natural welfare channels” such as the Children’s Bureau and the broad topic of sexuality must be removed from the “blighted connection it has had for over forty years

---

110 Dennett saw education as a panacea for the social ills of the industrial age – a view common to reformers of that period. Examples of Dennett’s commitment to freedom, democracy and education appear throughout her work. One example can be found in Dennett’s article “Aesthetics and Ethics,” HANDICRAFT vol. 1 no.2 (May 1902). 29-47.

111 Chen, Dennett, 1996.
with our vulgar benighted statutes." Only then, she believed, would birth control be a subject that was respectable enough to discuss publicly.

In January of 1918, Dennett took the position of Executive Secretary of the NBCL. The organization had been flagging and she tried to rejuvenate it. In her capacity as Executive Secretary, she wrote a report about the National Birth Control League’s obstacles, accomplishments and plans for the future. Dennett said that in spite of the war, significant accomplishments were achieved. Collaborative relationships had been established with city and state birth control organizations in Massachusetts, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Washington D.C, Cleveland, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Portland, Oregon and San Francisco. A committee of 100 was founded to provide special help for Margaret Sanger’s work and to advance the educational and legislative goals of the League. The League had more than doubled its membership. A bill to remove birth control from New York’s Little Comstock Law was introduced in Albany. A hearing was held and the Governor agreed to appoint a committee to investigate the matter. A Federal Bill was drafted and ready for the appropriate opportunity to introduce it. The League assisted two “moving picture” producers. Unfortunately, both films were censored. The report also indicated that Dennett had begun a special educational campaign targeted at “politically useful” members of the legislature.

---

112 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Dear Friend" (MWD Papers Reel 13, Folder 270, December 16, 1918).

113 Mary Ware Dennett, “The Case for Birth Control,” The Arbitrator, August 1918, 3.

114 Chen, Dennett, 1996, 205.

115 Mary Ware Dennett, "Report About the National Birth Control League" (MWD Papers, Reel 14, Folder 279, ~1918).

116 Ibid.
In an article Dennett wrote for the *Arbiter* in 1918, she reiterated a theme that frequently surfaces in her reform work about knowledge and democracy. She wrote: “Those who denounce contraceptive knowledge as ‘wrong’ or ‘dangerous’ must be reminded that education in its first stages has always been so considered by the stand-patters since time began.”117 While some people may use the knowledge “wrong,” that is no reason to deny the public their democratic right to information. Having that information might be dangerous, Dennett said, but “Freedom is always dangerous. It requires great responsibility and character to use freedom well.”118 Dennett believed that restrictive legislation that censored knowledge infantilized people and led to “muddled thinking, unclean notions, abortion and a weakened race.”119

In March of 1919, Dennett took stock of her relationship with the NBCL and their finances. Only $1,000 remained in the treasury, most of it raised by Dennett, and her salary had not been paid for two months. Furthermore, the Board decided to run the League with Dennett as the sole paid employee and supplement with volunteers. Dennett had ideas bigger than only one employee and a group of volunteers could accomplish. She had begun looking at birth control issues in broader terms and realized that she alone could not accomplish as much as she had planned.

**Voluntary Parenthood League (VPL)**

Dennett recognized that working on the state level did not affect enough people to warrant her considerable agenda for social justice. She realized that she could affect more

---


118 Ibid.

119 Ibid.
people with the same effort if she worked on federal legislation, rather than limiting her
efforts to modifying state legislation one by one. A federal bill would alleviate the need
for prolonged campaigning.\textsuperscript{120} Dennett drew from her experience with Alice Paul and
The National American Woman Suffrage Association in her strategy to tackle federal
legislation.\textsuperscript{121} Clearly, the NBCL was not prepared to support the kind of national
campaign that Dennett had in mind.

Dennett wrote Carleton in 1919 and
asked, “Did I tell you the B.C. League has
either got to be reorganized or slump into
nothingness and I quit, the 17\textsuperscript{th} – with the
League in debt to me $600?”\textsuperscript{122} The goals of
the NBCL were too narrow for her, just like
those of the Boston Society for Arts and
Crafts and the National American Woman
Association. Dennett moved on to found a
new organization in 1919 – The Voluntary
Parenthood League (VPL).\textsuperscript{123}

Dennett’s strategy for universal
access to birth control information remained constant throughout her life. She battled for

\textsuperscript{120} Mary Ware Dennett, "Birth Control's Hunt For Sponsor,"\textit{The New York Times}, February 26, 1922.

\textsuperscript{121} Chen,\textit{ Dennett}, 1996, 143.

\textsuperscript{122} Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to son, Carleton" (MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 15, 1919).

legislative reform to remove birth control information and devices from the obscenity law and to get knowledge to the people so that the wanted babies could be born and the unwanted babies could be delayed until parents were prepared for the responsibility. The only difference between the NBCL and the VPL were the tactics used.

Dennett and the other members of The Voluntary Parenthood League worked to make information about birth control available to all by working to remove birth control information and devices from the list of outlawed obscenities in the Federal Comstock Law. While the NBCL targeted Albany, the VPL targeted Washington. Dennett travelled there to lobby Congressmen and Senators to introduce her bill.\(^{124}\) Dennett believed Congress passed the Obscenity Law of 1873 without knowing that the law banned birth control information and devices. Instead, she blamed the crush of legislation at the end of a busy session for its quick passage by Congress.  

Dennett spent two years of concentrated but unsuccessful effort to find a legislative sponsor of the “clean bill.” At that point, Margaret Sanger founded the American Birth Control League (ABCL).\(^{125}\) At first, Sanger’s emphasis was on establishing clinics and acts of civil disobedience while Dennett remained committed to legislative reform.\(^{126}\) In the mid 1920s, however, Sanger turned to legislative reform as well.\(^{127}\) She began lobbying for a doctors-only bill whereby only physicians could prescribe birth control. Dennett and the VPL vehemently opposed the doctors-only bill,


\(^{125}\) Mary Ware Dennett, "Birth Control's Hunt For Sponsor," The New York Times, February 26, 1922.


because it gave middle class women who could afford medical care the privilege of reproductive freedom, while excluding the poor from that luxury.\footnote{Burns, \textit{The Moral Veto}, 2005, 109, 31.} By the end of 1922, Dennett found a sponsor for what was called the clean bill, but it never passed.\footnote{Rosen, \textit{Reproductive Health}, 2003, 86.}

In much the same way that her father’s principles in business limited his success, Dennett’s principles regarding privilege limited her success in the birth control movement. Dennett never abandoned her broad agenda for social justice that included personal freedom, civil liberties and access to knowledge. She “never accepted that physicians, rather than women themselves, should have control over access to contraception” as Sanger did. By emphasizing personal freedom, Dennett challenged both the taboo of sex for pleasure and the tenets of the Eugenics movement that emphasized the needs of society rather than the rights of the individual.\footnote{Burns, \textit{The Moral Veto}, 2005, 106.} She alienated two of Sanger’s most powerful allies – the American Medical Association and the American Eugenics Society.\footnote{Rosen, \textit{Reproductive Health}, 2003, 82.}

**Sex Education as Control**

In 1904, G. Stanley Hall published \textit{Adolescence}. In it, he introduced the notion of a distinct period within the developmental life cycle called adolescence. Hall surveyed children using questionnaires designed to discover what they actually knew and felt at various stages of development. Through these surveys, Hall showed evidence of a distinct developmental stage. Adolescents, he believed, had special needs, demands and unique
He thought the main developmental task during the teen years was to sublimate sexual urges in order to achieve a “high moral character.”

With the emergence of adolescence as a distinct stage in the maturation process, with a strong sexual component, a corresponding need to control, manage and regulate teens also emerged. Both Max Exner, a distinguished public health physician associated with the YMCA, and Maurice Bigelow, of Columbia’s Teachers College, believed that sexual desire was a “biological fact.” They believed, however, that the urge needed to be controlled and regulated.

Dennett agreed with Hall and the Social Hygienists that the teen years were unique. She called them a period of waking up, “partly of the body and partly of the feelings or emotions.” She did not, however, seek to control, regulate or suppress sexuality. As an alternative, Dennett believed knowledge and understanding, not fear, fostered self-control in individuals and she believed that adults had the responsibility to provide specific, honest and fearless information to children.

Hall and his colleagues, together with public school experts, teachers, clergy, social service agencies and parents all tried to manage and regulate the sexual drive of adolescents. They wanted to preserve the Victorian ideals of chastity, viewing the sex act as a “self-indulgence” that depleted “reserves” and spread venereal disease. Hall

---

132 Moran, Teaching Sex, 2001, 1.

133 Ibid., 42, 43.

134 Mary Ware Dennett, The Sex Side of Life, 1915, 6; Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Mr. Foster" (MWD Papers, Reel 2, Folder 26, August 1, 1916).

135 Ibid., 22

136 Ibid., 6.
stated that we do not yet “understand precisely how the hormones from the sex organs find their way to the higher centers, but it is certain that they do and that those guilty of self-indulgence have less reserve to draw upon for any emergency.”\textsuperscript{137} Many Americans shared Hall’s views. In contrast, Dennett was far more accepting of sexuality. In a letter to her Aunt Lucia about sexual mores she stated, “The selfish indulgence idea [about sex] seems to me akin to that pernicious old notion that there is something innately base in the sex relation.”\textsuperscript{138}

In 1905, Prince Morrow, a New York physician, reflected the public’s concerns about venereal disease and sexuality by founding the American Society for Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis (ASSMP) in order to “prevent the spread of diseases which have their origin in the ‘social evil.’”\textsuperscript{139} Later, it became a national organization called the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA), consisting of Progressive reformers who wanted to control the spread of venereal disease, prostitution and vice and to regulate and control sexuality in adolescents. Morrow believed the conspiracy of silence was so strong that public acknowledgement of venereal disease was viewed more harshly than privately becoming infected.\textsuperscript{140} Medical experts, professional educators and moralists participated in ASHA.\textsuperscript{141} Charles M. Eliot, President of ASHA and Harvard University and

\textsuperscript{137} G. Stanley Hall, \textit{Morale, The Supreme Standard of Life and Conduct} (New York: D. Appleton, 1920), 120.

\textsuperscript{138} Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Aunt Lucia" (New York: MWD Papers, ~1920).


\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 23.

correspondent of Dennett’s Uncle Ned, summarized a key element of ASHAs objectives: ASHA should advocate aggressively to promote the widely accepted protections against “sexual perversion” – for example, physical exercise, restraint in eating, abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, hot spices and all other drugs which weaken self-will even for a moment.¹⁴²

In 1913, a social commentator shared his views about sex education saying that, indeed, the “right sort of parent” can teach their child about sex far better than a school teacher can, however, most cannot. The risk of not offering sex education in the schools is that our children will receive it, nonetheless, but of the “most vicious character from vaudeville, comic operas, newspapers, billboards, picture postals, and private conversations with their schoolmates.”¹⁴³ While Comstock worked to erase any suggestion of sexuality, Social Hygienists worked to regulate it and Dennett worked to educate about it. Social Hygienists may have believed they were working to combat the conspiracy of silence, but they did little to advance the free flow of information.¹⁴⁴ Progress was not made until The Sex Side of Life was published in 1918.

The Sex Side of Life: The Private Purview

After Carleton began asking questions about sex, Dennett searched the New York Public Library, bookshops and the Library of the American Social Hygiene Association (asha) to find a suitable book to answer his questions. She believed a printed book or manual containing accurate information was important for two reasons. First, it would


add credibility to correct information about sex that was bound to contradict the incorrect information circulated among teens. Secondly, Dennett believed that children needed their own resource to consult whenever they had questions and to read at their leisure. Moreover, as a woman from New England stock she admitted to a certain reticence on her part about discussing “stirring ideas.” Dennett felt more comfortable with the printed word. Although each generation had made progress in their ability to speak openly about sexuality, she admitted that it was a very long process.\textsuperscript{145}

Dennett did not find any publication for Carleton that met her standards.\textsuperscript{146} She was very disappointed with what she found. From the perspective of pure physiology, Dennett thought existing books were acceptable, but not in any other aspect. In a letter to Carleton written in January of 1915, she detailed the deficiencies she found. In one, she told Carleton: “The author has a very old-fashioned stupid idea about women that makes me indignant. He talks as if women were made to be taken care of and not as if they were the partners in life with men.”\textsuperscript{147} She said the only acceptable parts were the biology and disease portions and continued her criticism by saying the author discussed sex as if it was wrong and should be suppressed and associated with shame. Dennett said attaching shame and fear to sexuality was an old fashioned concept. Instead, she believed sex to be “the very greatest physical and emotional pleasure there is in the world.” There is no shame in sex, only when it is “misused.” You need to know “just what the sex act is.”

The author assumes that children already know what it is, how to perform it and when to

\textsuperscript{145} Mary Ware Dennett, \textit{Who's Obscene?} (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1930), 3, 4.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{147} Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Son Carleton" (MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 16, January 10, 1915).
do so, but most do not. “They need help from older people about this. Remember to save all your questions and ask me. I will tell you everything.” Dennett had good reason to disapprove of the existing literature.

Responding to the dearth of accurate sex education books for children, Dennett decided to write her own. She wrote *The Sex Side of Life: An Explanation for Young People* in 1915 – the same year her son, Carleton needed it. It was quite radical for 1915 because Dennett included specific and frank information that addressed the physiological, scientific, moral and emotional aspects of sexuality in a way that differed from prevailing approaches. She spoke to the natural curiosity of children, without trying to control, repress or regulate. In support of accurate and comprehensive sex education, Dennett said “untruth is on the whole unlovely and harmful, therefore we call it wrong, that is, it does not work, so we pitch it out.”

Beginning with the very first paragraph in *The Sex Side of Life*, Dennett showed an undeniable reverence towards sexuality that was sure to inflame Anthony Comstock, the unctuous anti-vice crusader. Even the more progressive social hygienists were likely to prefer their own method of sex education – repressing sexuality rather than exalting and romanticizing it as Dennett did. Dennett described puberty as “the most wonderful and interesting part of growing up.” Moreover, she explained the specifics of

---

148 Ibid.

149 Mary Ware Dennett, *The Sex Side of Life*, 1915, 6.

150 Ibid., 6, 7.


152 Dennett, *The Sex Side of Life*, 1915, 6, 7.
intercourse; an issue that she believed children needed to know about.\footnote{153} She described labor and delivery as usually including “much pain and struggle for the mother” lasting between one hour and two days. Dennett also wrote about the time when birth control would be legal and only wanted babies would be born. It appears that Dennett drew from her personal experiences.\footnote{154}

Dennett used accurate terminology for genitalia and their functions, believing that correct and precise information would demystify the whole process and help adolescents make informed decisions. She believed that in a democratic society individuals should have the freedom and the responsibility to make their own decisions based on sound information – good or bad. She emphasized the distinctions between men and women on one side and plants and animals on the other rather than their similarities because she believed it was in the differences that children would understand the sexual nature of puberty and prepare themselves to make “wise” decisions when they matured.\footnote{155}

Additionally, Dennett refrained from using language such as chastity, self control, brute or animal passion because she believed those words were pejoratives, carrying the connotation that sex relations were wicked. Rather than including frightful descriptions and pictures about venereal diseases or admonishments to repress “animal passion,” Dennett said that venereal diseases were becoming curable, thereby allaying some of the fear of venereal disease. She did not approve of scaring teens to induce abstinence.\footnote{156}

\footnote{153} Ibid., 13.
\footnote{154} Dennett, \textit{The Sex Side of Life}, 1915, 14.
\footnote{155} Dennett, \textit{Who's Obscene?} 1930, xxiii, xxiv.
\footnote{156} Dennett, \textit{The Sex Side of Life}, 1915, 6, 7.
Moreover, she minimized the ill effects of masturbation by stating, “There is no occasion for worry unless the habit is carried to excess.”

**The Sex Side of Life: Public Purview**

*Children have a natural right as well as an inevitable urge to discuss things with their contemporaries. It is highly artificial and unjust to attempt to prevent it. All that parents can rightly do is to give children the honest information and to surround them with an atmosphere of fine feeling so that when they do talk to other children, as they certainly will, they will neither get nor give impressions, which are false or ugly.*

Mary Ware Dennett, 1932

While Dennett was researching and writing her sex education pamphlet for Carleton, she heard about a contest sponsored by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and The American Social Hygiene Association. They were offering a $1,000 prize for the best sex education booklet for teens between twelve and sixteen. Dennett was aware that her booklet was quite progressive and unlikely to win, but she decided to enter the contest just the same. The contest motivated her to formalize her material and structure the pamphlet in a way that would be useful to all adolescents, not just her own son. She conducted research at the Academy of Medicine and consulted Dr. Parameter, her family doctor, to check her facts. Dr. Parameter said he would not change a word and would even recommend it to parents who asked him about appropriate reading material for their children about sex. Dennett was thrilled.

---

157 Ibid., 18.


As she expected, Dennett did not win the $1,000 contest. Instead, Dr. and Mrs. Armstrong won the coveted prize – coveted because Dennett needed the money. They did nothing substantial to advance the pedagogy of sex education beyond the boundaries of control and regulation. James Foster of ASHA requested Dennett comment on the winning pamphlet, which she did in detail. Dennett said the Armstrongs condescended to children and wrote “extreme statements” that “no intelligent child could believe.” For example, the Armstrongs stated, “Beauty comes to everyone who properly cares for his body” and diet will assure that your skin remains clear. Dennett’s response was “Diet is by no means a cure for a pimply complexion.” The Armstrongs wrote about the sex instinct as the desire to “create new life.” Dennett, always the pragmatist disagreed, saying, “The sex instinct is the desire for the sex act, nothing more.”

More important for Dennett than winning the $1,000 contest, was Carleton’s response to *The Sex Side of Life*. He liked it, as did his friends, and soon Dennett began supplying copies of it to her friends for their adolescent children and to friends of theirs. Over the next three years, between 1915 and 1918, “the manuscript was loaned frequently” and as pages became worn, additional copies were made.

The publisher of *The Medical Review of Reviews* was interested in sex education and upon hearing of *The Sex Side of Life*, requested a copy of Dennett’s pamphlet. He was impressed and showed it to Dr. Victor Robinson, the Review’s editor, who was

---


161 Chen, *Dennett*, 1996, 176; Mary Ware Dennett, "Critique of Prize-Winning Sex Education Pamphlet" (MWD Papers, Reel 2, Folder 26, August 1916).


equally impressed. *The Sex Side of Life* was first published in the Medical Review of Reviews in February 1918. Robinson introduced it in the most complimentary of terms. He said he was somewhat acquainted with “Anglo-American sexology” but did not know of any other booklet that equaled the quality of Dennett’s. Robinson wrote, “Instead of the familiar notes of fear and pretense, we were surprised to hear the clarion call of truth.”¹⁶⁴ Not all proponents of sex education were as straightforward as Dennett.

**Sex Education as Medicine**

The idea of sex education being a medical matter was promoted during the early twentieth century by Progressive reformers. Connecting the science of medicine with sex education helped to authenticate its importance and make it more palatable to traditionalists of the day. But, it also furnished a convenient pretext for ignoring the aspects of human sexuality that were difficult to discuss. By hiding sex education behind medical nomenclature, pressing concerns regarding venereal diseases were addressed, but other issues about human sexuality, particularly useful to adolescents, were not. Dennett addressed the tendency of Progressive reformers to idealize science. She said that if the body were more like a machine, than learning about it and taking care of it scientifically would be possible. But bodies were more complex she said, and included such unscientific and complex things as emotional development and morality.¹⁶⁵

Wrapping sex education in medical facts, however, did not make it palatable to everyone. One social commentator of the day accused sex education of “inflaming

---


¹⁶⁵ Mary Ware Dennett, *The Sex Side of Life*, 1915, 10.
desires,” and implored the sex hygienist to “put away the countless seductions which assault mankind and womankind…Let the young have less desire not more knowledge.”

In 1919, right after World War I and one year after Dennett published *The Sex Side of Life*, the United States Public Health Service (USPHS), in cooperation with the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and ASHA launched a sex education program of their own, called *Keeping Fit*. The goal was to provide accurate information about “the whole process of reproduction and the nurture of children, the meaning of marriage, illegitimacy and the hygiene of sound recreation at appropriate periods from early childhood to mature manhood and womanhood.” Some, however, called the “Keeping Fit” campaign nothing more than a perpetuation of the conspiracy of silence because it did not provide information about human sexuality or specifics about reproduction. Instead, the campaign was actually about preventing venereal diseases and maintaining purity. Antibiotics were not available yet, making venereal diseases especially problematic.

The campaign was funded by the federally sponsored Chamberlain-Kahn act of 1918, whose primary goal was to fight the rampant spread of venereal disease in the military during WWI. Armed with a scientific approach to understanding biology, the Social Hygienists were confident about their ability to control sexual activity. The *Keeping Fit* Campaign stressed the importance of physical fitness, believing that sports

---

166 Current Opinion, "Sex Education As Its Friends and Its Foes View It," *American Periodicals Online* LV, no. 4 (October 1913).


168 Ibid.,134.
would exhaust the boys, leaving little energy to do anything unacceptable. Furthermore, it was thought that staying active and physically fit would channel sexual energy into a higher purpose. According to an historical poster from the campaign, “The sex instinct of a boy or man makes him want to act, dare, possess, strive. When controlled and directed it gives energy, endurance and fitness.” Essentially, the campaign was about abstinence and promoted self-control on the part of the male to avoid causing his future wife and child to suffer. (See Illustration 1 for a sample poster from the Keeping Fit campaign.)

A separate campaign was aimed at African American men and boys. It included the same messages as Keeping Fit, good health, abstinence and purity, but it contained images of African Americans in an effort to make the benefits of physical fitness more personal and appealing. Youth and Life was a similar campaign, launched by ASHA in 1922 for girls. It advised girls to stay healthy and not to get too familiar with friends. Maurice A. Bigelow cautioned that medical science might be able to stop the spread of venereal diseases without “simultaneously improving moral standards.” In fact, a “study” conducted during World War I supported his concern. The study concluded that fear, the most popular method used to encourage abstinence, had little or no affect on male behavior. At the time of his retirement in 1940, still concerned about

---


171 Ibid.

172 Ibid.

the American Social Hygiene Association’s (ASHA) lack of comprehensive sex 
education, Bigelow stated that the concern for venereal diseases had become so 
widespread that social hygiene had become a euphemism for controlling them.”

Dennett agreed that the available sex education books did not answer the questions that 
adolescents were likely to have.

**Sex Education: Behind The Times**

By the 1920s, the belief that sex was exclusively for reproduction was being 
replaced by the notion that pleasure, separate from conception was as legitimate an 
activity in marriage, as was procreation. The concept of sex as pleasurable, however, 
was not reflected in most sex education materials. One excellent example of old 
fashioned attitudes about sex is contained in a 1929 pamphlet that bears the same name as 
Dennett’s booklet, *The Sex Side of Life*.

Nearly fifteen years after Dennett wrote her booklet, Greer wrote his. In a 
discussion about puberty, the author concludes that girls become shy and timid during 
puberty while boys become gallant and passionate. During puberty, Greer stated, it is 
especially important for boys to live in a wholesome environment, where he can be lured 
away from the “sensual vices and the influence of evil companions that constantly beset 
him.”

In 1919, Maurice A. Bigelow wrote a scathing review of Dennett’s sex education 
pamphlet for *The Survey*. Bigelow said that Dennett’s phrasing of “sex relations” was

---

174 Ibid., 98.


176 Joseph H. Greer, M.D., *The Sex Side of Life* (M. Stein, 1929), 4, 5, 8.
“unfortunately crude” and “probably dangerously suggestive to young people.”\footnote{Maurice A. Bigelow, review of The Sex Side of Life” by Mary Ware Dennett,” The Survey, August 13, 1919, 760.} That remark seems somewhat misplaced coming from Bigelow, a professor at Teacher’s College and an advocate for sex education. The comment is reminiscent of Comstock’s prudery over public displays or references to sexuality of any kind for fear that it would corrupt the moral life of children. While Bigelow was an advocate for sex education in the public school system, it is clear that he was far more cautious than Dennett. Bigelow did not want to break down the general sense of “reserve” publicly associated with morality, while Dennett’s concerns lay elsewhere.\footnote{The New York Times, "Parents Lack Skill in Sex Education," February 20, 1914.}

\textbf{The Trial}

The vast difference between Dennett’s approach to sex education and prevailing attitudes eventually led to her arrest in 1929, nearly fifteen years after she first wrote \textit{The Sex Side of Life}. Written in 1915 for her sons and published in 1918 in the Medical Review of Reviews, Dennett eventually sold over 35,000 copies in seven editions. In the introduction, the editor highly recommended the pamphlet be reprinted and made commonly available. It was. The booklet was distributed to teachers, social workers, doctors, parents, ministers and the YM and YWCA. It was well received by most institutions, with one notable exception.\footnote{“The Prosecution of Mary Ware Dennett,” American Civil Liberties Union, June 1929, http://debs.indstate/a505P7_1929.pdf (accessed January 15, 2011), 3.}

In 1922, E.M Morgan, US Postmaster wrote to Dennett saying that under section 211 of the Penal Code, it was illegal to send \textit{The Sex Side of Life} through the mail.
Dennett, however, continued mailing the booklet in sealed envelopes. Then, in 1929, evidence was procured through a decoy that the booklet was still in circulation. Dennett was indicted and required to appear in court five days later, where she was released on $2,500 bail after spending the day in a holding cell. The maximum penalty for the charge was a $5,000 fine and five years in prison.

Her case went to trial, and on April 23, 1929, a jury of twelve men found her guilty in only 40 minutes of deliberation. Dennett was fined $300, which she refused to pay, saying, “If I have corrupted the youth of America, a year in jail is not enough for me, and I will not pay the fine!” Furthermore, she said she would appeal the decision and would rather go to jail than bend to censorship laws. Friend and ACLU attorney, Morris Ernst represented Dennett in both the trial and the appeal at no charge.

The ACLU formed a Defense Committee and sent out 2,000 letters to friends and colleagues, asking for financial and moral support for Dennett. Many prominent people including Havelock Ellis, the Rabbi Dr. Steven H. Wise and John Dewey, responded to the request. In fact, John Dewey was the head of her defense committee

---

184 Dennett’s case is considered by the ACLU to be a milestone in the defense of personal freedom, reproductive rights, women’s rights and censorship. In 1920, nine years prior to her court case, Dennett, along with Jane Addams and others were instrumental in founding the ACLU. Online Documents http://www.aclu.org/printer/printer.php. MaryWare Dennett, Verbatim Report of the Town Hall Meeting, New York: Voluntary Parenthood League, October 1921, (accessed April 11, 2008)
186 Ibid. John Dewey was the head of Dennett’s defense committee and wrote to 2,000 people who had expressed interest in her case.
and provided a personal letter intended for use in court, where he not only agreed with the benefits of Dennett’s approach to sex education, but also suggested the booklet be widely distributed. On March 3, 1930, Dennett’s conviction was overturned on appeal. She was a national hero, however, she was impoverished and emotionally depleted.

The 1929-obscenity trial of 58-year old Mary Ware Dennett for distributing *The Sex Side of Life* through the U.S. mail signified a pivotal shift in ACLU policy. Up until Dennett’s trial, the ACLU limited its activities to protecting free speech and defending the rights of labor organizers and political dissidents. After Dennett’s trial, however, the ACLU broadened its free speech agenda to include all forms of

---


censorship, including fighting to overturn Comstock’s 1873 Obscenity Law, and access to birth control devices and information, and sex education. Dennett is commonly credited with the broadened focus.

For Dennett however, her 1929 trial for obscenity did not signify a defining moment in her philosophical outlook or political career. For Dennett, the trial and the widespread publicity that accompanied it only brought her lifelong commitment to free speech, individual freedom and the right to know into the public sphere.

Never comfortable being in the public eye, Dennett was exhausted after the trial. Although she continued to work in the background of the birth control and sex education movements, Dennett seemed to yield control to Sanger. She returned to the leather work of her young adult years and some time in the mid 1930s she moved to Queens, NY to live with her younger son Devon. The Sex Side of Life received a tremendous amount of publicity because of the trial and sales increased markedly. In time, it was translated into fifteen languages and it underwent twenty-three printings. Dennett received a small income from sales of the pamphlet as well as from her books.

Dennett helped to found The World Federalists, an organization that sought international peace. She served as chair from 1941 to 1944. In 1945, she entered a

---

190 Laura M. Weintraub claims credit for the idea that Dennett’s trial caused the pivotal shift in focus for the ACLU. “Lawyers, Libertines and the Reinvention of Free Speech,” 1920-1933, NYU Legal History Colloquium, September 30, 2009. However, at least two prior publications make the same connection as Weintraub: Craig, The Sex Side of Life, 8 and Samuel Walker, The Rights Revolution: Rights and Community in Modern America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 93.

191 Chen, Dennett, 1996, 301, 302.

Nursing Home and after two years of poor health, Dennett died at the age of 75 on July 26, 1947 at the Barnwell Nursing Home in Valatie New York.\(^{193}\) Per her wishes, Dennett was cremated.\(^{194}\)

**Summary**

*We give to young folks, in their general education, as much as they can grasp of science and ethics and art, and yet in their sex education, which rightly has to do with all of these, we have said, “Give them only the bare physiological facts, lest they be prematurely*

*Mary Ware Dennett, 1918*

Dennett was a determined supporter of the free exchange of information and spent many years trying to make birth control information and devices available and promoting sex education.\(^{195}\) She organized the National Birth Control League, founded the Voluntary Parenthood League and she wrote *The Sex Side of Life*. Furthermore, she wrote numerous articles, several books and lectured extensively on reproductive freedom and the importance of forthright sex education.\(^{196}\) All three initiatives developed from the same core values – her belief in freedom of information and individual responsibility.

Dennett believed that in a democratic society, all citizens had the right to scientifically accurate and comprehensive knowledge. Moreover, she believed individuals had the right to use that information in any way he or she deemed desirable. Her views

---


195 Dennett saw education as a panacea for the social ills of the Progressive era – a view common to reformers of that period.

196 In addition to *The Sex Side of Life*, Dennett wrote *Birth Control Laws: Shall We Keep Them, Change Them Or Abolish Them?* (1926), *Who’s Obscene* (1930); *The Sex Education of Children* (1931).
about the free exchange of information regarding sex education were far more progressive and quite different from those of the anti-vice crusaders and social hygienists.

Between the 1870s and the 1920s, approaches towards sexual expression and information underwent profound change – changes that were informed by the social, political and economic climate of industrial capitalism. The anti-vice crusaders sought to quash all information about sexuality and sexual expression, while the social hygienists attempted to regulate and control it, using fear campaigns to prevent children from indulging in “sexual evil.” Dennett, however, provided a robust representation, including information on emerging sexuality in puberty, intercourse, physiology and the central place of sex within a healthy relationship. Additionally, she minimized the harmful effects of masturbation and venereal disease.

The differences between Dennett and others interested in sex education make the question: *What motivated Dennett to publish The Sex Side of Life* relevant and worthy of analysis. Dennett must have been aware of the disparity between her views and prevailing social mores and the legal, financial and social risk she took. Chapter 7, the conclusion, provides an analysis of the factors that led to her decision to publish.
CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

*I think that undoubtedly the sex side of life is fuller of misconceptions, crudities and gross injustices than any other side of our life, except perhaps the economic side, but just the same, I believe it can and will be purified and beautified. It is painfully evoluting. And even now, there are lovely instances that are a joy to think about.¹*

Mary Ware Dennett, ~1920

In 1918, Mary Ware Dennett boldly published *The Sex Side of Life*, a manual that disabused adolescents of the common *misconceptions, crudities and gross injustices* of human sexuality and expression.² Her ability to do so was public evidence of her lifetime commitment to *The Dynamic Side of Life* and it demonstrated Dennett’s essential radical nature regarding sex and education. On the surface, Dennett’s life and accomplishments may appear conventional, but upon closer inspection, the fundamental aspects of her radical politics surface.

Dennett was a woman deeply committed to education and its transformational power. She wanted men, women and children – including legislators and immigrants; factory owners, labor organizers and artisans; educators and parents; voters and disenfranchised voters as well as white women and women of color – to have a voice in their future and the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions. Dennett promoted transparency of information and she trusted in each citizen’s right and ability to control their own lives.

¹ Mary Ware Dennett, “Letter to Aunt Lucia in Defense of Dennett's Progressive Views on Sexuality” (New York: MWD Papers, ~1920).

To that end, Dennett supported free speech, civil liberties and the right to know in all of her political work, and on a personal level, she continually expanded her boundaries in response to new knowledge. As she developed and learned more about her environment, she took on broader and more central issues in her work with each subsequent political organization. Freire called a growth process like Dennett’s “praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”

Dennett’s unequivocal conviction that all members of a truly democratic society have the right to know was quite radical in its time, and is still radical today. It is radical because implicit in that outlook is the belief that with knowledge, ordinary people have the ability and the responsibility to chart their own course in life without control from those on top of the social hierarchy. Freire said, “A real humanist can be identified more by his trust in people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without that trust.” Dennett was a true humanist, trusting in the ability of ordinary people.

Dennett did not support the banking model of education, where informational deposits were made at the pleasure of those in control. For example, Dennett did not support the distribution of birth control information and devices exclusively through the medical establishment. Without an individual having direct access to knowledge, the medical community retained control and power over the individual. Dennett did not support the banking model of data transfer because it is a static rather than dynamic

---

4 Ibid., 60.
model of education. The individual remains passive and powerless and those in power are able to retain control.\(^5\)

The goal of this research was to examine the social, political and economic issues that surrounded the controversy of sex education in the early twentieth century by examining the lived experience of one woman. How was this self-effacing, hard-working and serious New England woman able to transcend existing attitudes and taboos about sexuality and publish a manual that presented sex as a glorious experience? By researching Dennett’s narrative and her relationship to the existing social order in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, knowledge also surfaced to assist in understanding contemporary issues surrounding sexuality and sex education.

Rather than using a *structural functional* approach to historical inquiry where systems and institutions are studied, Dennett’s life was examined by means of narrative inquiry. Her life was complicated and her story is intertwined with multi-dimensional elements: the cultural and intellectual heritage of her ancestors, influences from her family of origin, the social milieu of New England, her personal life and the systemic changes associated with industrial capitalism. Narrative inquiry is a bottom-up look at society that goes beyond a snapshot of a particular point in time. It begins with the lived experiences of individuals who are often marginalized and sometimes ordinary, rather than the structures and systems that control them. It is a way of broadening history to include multiple voices and to provide a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the past. In doing so, we gain clarity about similar contemporary

\(^5\) Ibid., 72
issues.⁶ At the core of narrative inquiry is the rebuilding of a person’s experience in association with others and to the collective environment.⁷

Dennett belonged to a multigenerational family system, where a series of interconnected associations between family members crossed several generations. The Family Systems Theory developed by Murray Bowen helps to explain recurring family characteristics, values and principles that emerged throughout the Coffin family line, eventually affecting Dennett’s aunts and uncles, her immediate family and finally, Dennett herself.⁸ The intergenerational sharing of family qualities takes place by means of several related mechanisms, from the direct and conscious transfer of knowledge between parent and extended family members to the child, to habitual and unconscious encoding of emotional responses and actions.⁹

The recurrence of core Coffin values in successive generations provides evidence of the family systems theory at work. Dennett’s family transmitted their foundational values in several specific ways. They consciously retold stories of Coffin ancestors that emphasized the qualities they admired and wanted to see continued in succeeding generations. Dennett was a frequent guest at her Great Uncle Charles Carleton Coffin’s home when she was a child and she enjoyed the many stories he shared with her about

---


their ancestors. Great Uncle Charles was an historian who wrote about Coffin forbears and dozens of other historical subjects such as the building of the republic, Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War. It is clear from the information Dennett shared with her grandson Peter that she read Uncle Charles’ book about Coffin ancestors and family members and absorbed the stories he told.

Dennett internalized the Coffin belief system and led her life in a forthright manner guided by her principles and beliefs. Several distinct characteristics recurred throughout the generations laying a strong foundation for Dennett’s notions of social responsibility and activism. As Bowen suggests, Dennett absorbed those characteristics both consciously and unconsciously through her ancestors and family.

Furthermore, their characteristics and behaviors unconsciously modeled the Coffin family culture that supported social responsibility and those behaviors were carried forward. Lastly, Coffin family members displayed an explicit commitment to social action, thereby serving as concrete models for the next generation. Coffin characteristics served as powerful shapers of Dennett’s development.

With core Coffin principles and practices that she inherited through the multigenerational transmission process, Dennett had a firm grounding and unwavering belief in the principles of freedom, democracy and education – three interconnected and consistent themes that drove her broad agenda for social justice. Besides developing

---

13 Chen describes Dennett’s training as deeply rooted in her family’s Puritan stock that valued “honesty, humility, intellectual rigor and justice.” Chen, Dennett, 1996, 5.
political strength and courage from her ancestors and family members, Dennett benefitted from new opportunities associated with the dawning of the *new woman*.

At the turn of the century, women struggled between the Victorian ideals associated with *true womanhood* and the freedoms associated with the *new woman*. The tenets of *true womanhood* bound white middle and upper class women to the home by the four principal virtues of “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.” The reproductive sphere was a place where women were shielded from the “dangerous and fickle world” at the turn of the century.\(^{14}\) A woman’s influence resided in her ability to care for her husband and children in a pious and happy home, and to educate her sons to become righteous and successful leaders in society.\(^{15}\)

With the growth of industrial capitalism and commerce, and the rise of the middle class, the gap between home and work widened. The world of work was for men and the husband’s absence from the home contributed to the idea that home was the woman’s domain over which she presided.\(^{16}\) Popular media, religious teachings, the legal system and common practice reinforced the notion of separate spheres. *True womanhood* both sheltered and controlled white middle and upper class women.

Inventions and improvements in the late nineteenth century specifically helped women to leave the confinement of the home. Progress in transportation made it easier for women to travel long distances without male protection. Electric streetlights helped women feel safer on city streets at night and advances in the printing industry made it

---


\(^{15}\) Ibid.

possible for reform literature to be easily distributed.\textsuperscript{17} The characteristics and freedoms associated with the \textit{new woman} intrigued many women and drew them from the private to the public sphere of influence.\textsuperscript{18}

Many bridged the gap between the two spheres through volunteer work in women’s clubs, moral reform societies, abolitionist groups and temperance unions. There, women developed confidence, analytical and public speaking skills, and a greater understanding of institutional structures.\textsuperscript{19} They learned about business, money management and how to conduct meetings. In short, “they learned to be professionals before the traditional professions were open to them.”\textsuperscript{20} In voluntary organizations, women learned to employ the public power denied to them in every other aspect of their lives. Women’s membership in these organizations provided an unconventional career ladder that was open to women when other career alternatives were not.\textsuperscript{21}

Dennett was part of this wave of \textit{new women} who embraced fresh opportunities and who developed and honed their organizational, political and legislative skills in women’s clubs and organizations. While additional career ladders are open to contemporary women, organizational work still offers a method for women to develop skills necessary to enter the productive arena. Before Hartley abandoned Dennett, she too was sheltered and at least to a certain extent controlled, in the reproductive sphere like

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{18} Definition for the \textit{new woman} varies; Roggenkamp, \textit{Narrating the News}, 2005, 83.

\textsuperscript{19} Matthews, \textit{Women’s Struggle}, 1997, 38, 39.


\textsuperscript{21} Fiorr Scott, \textit{Women's Associations}, 1993, 177.
other middle class white women. It is not an accident that in their business arrangement, Dennett decorated the homes that Hartley built.

As an artist herself, Dennett knew from personal experience how difficult it was to earn a living by creating art. Inspired by Ruskin and Morris to address the economic conditions of industrial capitalism rather than focusing exclusively on aesthetics, Dennett placed humanistic concerns above material things. Some leaders in the Arts and Crafts movement believed that educating the public about art, in effect raising the public’s taste for original art, would create a sufficient market to support the artisan. Dennett, however, did not agree. She expressed concern for the Artisan’s quality of life and his inability to achieve financial independence within the context of industrial capitalism. Dennett wanted to see a paradigm shift in the country’s economic, industrial and social conditions to allow for the financial security of the artisan.22 She recommended a broad based public education program that addressed character rather than facts, the principle of service rather than consumerism, and education that leaned in the direction of community and collaboration rather than competition.23 Essentially, the type of education Dennett believed in was one that created good citizens for life in a democratic society with a focus on the social good rather than capitalism, similar to a social common wealth.

In her role as executive secretary, chair and member of the Board of Directors of The Literature Company of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), Dennett was intimately involved in producing and distributing millions of pieces of suffrage literature annually. In 1911, she reported that 3,000,000 informational

---

22 Dennett, Aesthetics, 1902, 46.
23 Ibid., 13.
pieces of literature had been produced and dispersed in that year alone. Additionally, correspondence had tripled over the prior year’s production and included widespread international communication. In this way, Dennett was involved in educating the public about women’s suffrage.

In 1912, only two years after Dennett was elected to the board of NAWSA, she became dissatisfied with the organization and the politics of its leaders. For the next few years until her resignation in 1914, Dennett expressed her disapproval in correspondence to colleagues and NAWSA president, Anna Howard Shaw. Dennett accused Shaw of pandering to the rich benefactors of NAWSA, thereby compromising the democratic structure of the organization. In a letter Dennett wrote to Shaw in which she warned of the consequences of any hint of impropriety in NAWSA she said, “We don’t want to have a bit of saw-dust in our dollies.”

Dennett wanted to “broaden and deepen” the scope of suffrage work by linking it to the systemic social issues of the day. She thought the issue of women’s suffrage was much larger than merely getting the vote. She associated women’s suffrage with creating a fully democratic nation. Dennett viewed her work with the literature department as a “bore” unless it was “part of a big inspiring background of progressive and fundamentally important work!” She did not believe suffrage alone warranted the existence of an expensive national organization.

---

25 Mary Ware Dennett, "Letter to Anna Shaw" (New York: MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 214, September 1, 1914) 1, 2.
26 Ibid., 7; Dennett, "Letter to Anna Shaw" 1912, 12.
Dennett spent her life working in leadership roles to advance individual rights, freedom and responsibility, civil liberties, democratic values and education, and to eliminate all forms of privilege and government restrictions on information of every kind. Her commitment to making information available and accessible across social, racial and class lines appears in the school papers she wrote as a child, in the letters she wrote to her sons at school and in the enormous quantity of position papers, books and correspondence of her reform work prepared for legislatures, judges and activists. She said:

*No law in any modern country with democratic principles has a right to forbid people to know. The progressive workers in the birth control movement are bent upon changing these laws. After that, whether people make use of that information is their own private concern.*  

Dennett’s core beliefs remained consistent throughout her life; however, as she matured, she continued to expand and re-focus her views and approaches to social action. Dennett embraced the belief in living a dynamic rather than stagnant life, warning against everything that was likely to keep one’s thoughts inactive. Dennett was completely engaged in *The Dynamic Side of Life* where she experienced the dialectic between ideas, people, family and community.  

Dennett believed the essence of life was about constant growth – adjusting, shifting and restructuring – to align oneself with the evolving nature of the community.

---

27 Refers to the Comstock Obscenity Laws of 1873 that criminalized the mailing of, among other things, “every article or thing designed, adapted, or intended for preventing conception or producing abortion.” From: Dennett, *What Sort of Laws Have We Now?* 1926, 9; Dennett, *Voluntary Parenthood, Letter to the Editor,* February 11, 1922.

Like her associate John Dewey, Dennett’s approach to social action was about associations: connecting the particular with the general; specific issues with broader social, political and economic concerns; and linking small problems with larger ones. In a letter to her Aunt Lucia Dennett said: “But always we must look out that we do not make rigid boundaries which prevent the expansion of life within the rules. We must not cramp freedom so that the spirit of man becomes static.” Dennett lived the philosophy of continued growth and intellectual expansion that she so eloquently expressed to her aunt. For Dennett, there could be no distinction between theory and practice.

Dennett consistently put her beliefs into practice. When the leadership of the BSAC would not address the problems of the Artisan within the broader context of industrial capitalism, Dennett attempted to convince them to widen their perspective. She wrote position papers and corresponded with them in her effort to convince BSAC members to place ethics before aesthetics. After that failed, Dennett resigned. Instead, she became involved with organizations that she believed did “more to promote industrial democracy,” than the BSAC, such as the Single Tax movement and the Consumers’ Leagues. Her breach with and subsequent resignation from the BSAC may have been Dennett’s first public stance in support of her core values and personal belief system, but it was far from her last.

Similarly, after the leadership of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) would not connect suffrage to broader democratic issues such as race and feminism Dennett became disaffected. She described Alice Paul’s attempt to

---


30 Borris, Craftsman’s Ideal, 1986, 40.
exclude African American women from the first suffrage parade in Washington (1913) as discriminatory. Dennett was the only leader in the suffrage movement who argued against Paul’s racially based attempt to exclude African American women from the parade. In 1914, Dennett resigned from the NAWSA.

Additionally, Dennett resigned from the National Birth Control League (NBCL) in 1919 when members of the Board did not share Dennett’s vision. The Board reduced the staff to only one paid employee – Dennett herself – and Dennett knew that she needed more support to carry out the legislative reform that she had in mind. Instead of working on the state level, one state at a time, Dennett decided it would be easier to work towards a single legislative reform on the federal level. Her approach moved from the particular to the general.

She acted upon her beliefs despite changes in public sentiment. In 1914, after the First World War began in Europe, Dennett joined suffragists, Heterodites and other peace activists in a contingent of 1,500 women who marched in protest against the war. Dressed in black, they walked in silence down New York’s Fifth Avenue. The marchers were greeted with applause from the crowds who gathered to watch. Dennett became part of The Woman’s Peace Party (WPP) that developed after the

---


March, even serving on the board. After the United States entered the war, many women of the WPP modified their position. Some accepted and others actually supported American intervention. Dennett did not.

She and other stalwart peace activists regrouped and formed a new branch of the WPP (NYC-WPP) that included other radical feminists such as Heterodites Crystal Eastman and Anne Herendeen. While the women of the national association were defined by the cult of true womanhood and separate spheres, the new women in the NYC-WPP connected war with broader social issues in the public arena. Together with the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM) of which Dennett was also a member they campaigned against military preparedness and the mandate requiring boys between sixteen and nineteen to attend three hours of military training per week and to attend a two to four week military preparation camp during the summer. Furthermore, they published a Journal, *Four Lights*, and *The ABC’s of Internationalism*, a listing of all the international organizations that illustrated the kinds of collaboration and helpfulness that existed between nations.

Dennett was one of the founding members of the People’s Council of America. The Council was a radical organization with strong Socialist and trade union ties. They

---

33 Dennett, “Biographical Notes,” ~1930, 3.


35 Ibid.


38 Ibid.
campaigned to repeal the draft and to protest the war. Additionally, they championed suffrage, labor rights, anti-lynching laws and birth control. They were advocates for a worldwide organization to circumvent future wars.\textsuperscript{39} As Dennett’s politics deepened, she shifted her focus from Americanism to internationalism, from the particular to the general. She said, “My country is the world, my countrymen are all mankind.”\textsuperscript{40} She was consistent in acting upon her beliefs over the course of her life, which spanned many social changes.

Nearly 100 years after Dennett first published \textit{The Sex Side of Life}, we are still grappling with many of the same issues that she confronted. The similarity between the early twentieth century and the early twenty-first century is noteworthy. Then, a plethora of venereal diseases threatened the health and wellbeing of society and now, a pandemic of sexually transmitted diseases are doing the same thing. The parallels between the two eras extend further.

Each movement followed an economic revolution of sorts, then an Industrial Revolution and now an information revolution. In both cases, new modes of technology and commerce created a distinctly different culture and a sudden growth of pornography. In the twentieth century, advances in printing, newspaper production and distribution through the Post Office made erotica more accessible than in prior years. Now, in the twenty-first century, the same thing has happened. Without the limitations of print, it is much easier to create and widely distribute pornography with the use of technology – the Internet and graphic design software.


\textsuperscript{40} Chen, \textit{Dennett}, 1996,168.
In both cases, scientific advances facilitated a far more public face to sexual commerce than ever before, and in both cases, the conservative right rose to repress the public displays, especially in adolescents. In the early twentieth century, we had the White Cross Society with its purity pledge and the fear tactics championed by the social hygienists. Now, we have abstinence only sex education programs, chastity clubs with father/daughter chastity balls and contemporary abstinence pledges. In both cases, the message was and is to preserve American family values. The translation is the maintenance of the existing social order – the values of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant heterosexuals.

Industrialization caused inevitable changes in the size of the American family, alarming mid-nineteenth-century reformers and social commentators. Some blamed the decreasing size of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant American families on social and moral decay – primarily because some women no longer wanted to devote as much time to childrearing. Others blamed the decline on a misdirected desire to accumulate wealth, pleasure and fashionable merchandise rather than planning for marriage. Still others may have been reluctant to risk the dangers of childbirth.

Prince Morrow and his colleagues of the American Social Hygiene Association connected their concerns about the spread of venereal diseases to the apprehension native-born, white middle class Protestants felt as the nation became more metropolitan and heterogeneous. Many Americans came to perceive venereal disease and prostitution as “metaphors for social decline, as the stigmata of a decadent modern

---

41 Beisel, Imperiled Innocents, 1997, 32.
world." The moral reform movement of the late nineteenth-century illustrates the conservative backlash that occurs when conditions threaten the reproduction of the existing social hierarchy.

Similarly, the religious right of today views the control of sexuality as a method to reinstate traditional American values and ideals. In abstinence-only curriculum such as *Sex Respect* and *Teen-Aid*, the conservative agenda is articulated. They view abstinence-only education as, “instruments for moral regeneration and the rebirth of traditional values.” Given those parallels, Dennett’s publication of sexual information is embedded in a social-cultural context that is accessible to people today.

Dennett’s ability to publish *The Sex Side of Life* grew out of a multilayered core belief system. She was an intellectual and a civil libertarian, a feminist and a supporter of individual rights and responsibility and she believed in gender, class and racial equality. She had a rebellious and innovative spirit, along with courage and stamina. Dennett was responsible, thrifty and generous. All of these personal qualities and characteristics informed the range of activities that she pursued in the reform organizations that claimed most of her adult life.

Dennett did not plan to write a sex education manual for adolescents, but as a pragmatist, when the need surfaced, she struggled to fill the gap. After Carleton began asking her questions about sex, Dennett searched in vain for a suitable book to give to him. Some were too medical and detached from emotion; others did not offer information about the emotional aspects of sex or the sex act itself and still others patronized women.

---


43 Ibid., 214
Dennett could not bear to see her sons crippled with ignorance about sex as she had been. Furthermore, she wanted her sons to have a healthy knowledge and appreciation for the central role she believed sex had in relationships, a role Dennett herself had not realized until sometime after Hartley abandoned her. The knowledge she shared with her sons in *The Sex Side of Life* was an act of love. Dennett’s manual for her sons was copied and passed along to the children of her friends. It was published in *The Medical Review of Reviews* in 1918 and thousands of copies were distributed extensively to institutions and individuals worldwide before she was arrested for sending obscenity through the mail in 1929.

Dennett did not intend to break any laws or to be arrested and be the focus of a cause célèbre. Her only intent was to educate her children. Because the need for sex education was so great, it was a natural transition, like so many of her other transitions, from the particular to the general, from individual to community, from her private life with her sons to publication of *The Sex Side of Life*.

Nearly a century after publication, the lessons that surfaced from Dennett’s transition between the private and the public side of life are still valid. The ability to actively engage with the world is critical for empowerment and active engagement can only occur with complete access to knowledge and information. Sexuality is part of the knowledge and comprehensive information that is necessary to experience *The Dynamic Side of Life*. 
### APPENDIX

**A: Family Genealogy: Direct Ancestors, Children and Extended Family**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Marriage Date</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
<th>Year of Death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peter Coffin</td>
<td>m. Joanna Thember</td>
<td>n.d. -1681</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tristram Coffin</td>
<td>m. Dionis Stephens</td>
<td>1609-1681</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tristram Coffin jr.</td>
<td>m. Judith Greenleaf</td>
<td>1632-1703/1704</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathanial Coffin</td>
<td>m. Sarah Brockleback</td>
<td>(1669-1749)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Coffin</td>
<td>m. Judith Greenleaf</td>
<td>(1694-1762)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captain Peter Coffin</td>
<td>m. Rebecca Hazeltine</td>
<td>(1722-1789)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Coffin</td>
<td>m. Hannah Kilburn and Hannah Bartlet</td>
<td>(1777-1853)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Carleton Coffin</td>
<td>m. Sally</td>
<td>(1823-1886)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elvira Coffin Ames</td>
<td>m. Nathan Ames</td>
<td>(1819-1861)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Coffin Ames Clara Coffin Ames</td>
<td>m. Edwin Doak Mead</td>
<td>(1859-n.d.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucia Coffin Ames Mead</td>
<td>m. George Ware</td>
<td>(1856-1936)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livonia Coffin Ames Ware</td>
<td>m.</td>
<td>(1843-n.d.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Bradford Coffin Ware</td>
<td>m.</td>
<td>(1870-n.d.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara Coffin Ware Hill</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

44 Includes only Dennett’s direct ancestral line, relevent extended family members and children. Arrows indicate children. Shaded cells indicate the Coffin line and adjacent shaded cells indicate siblings.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mary Coffin Ware Dennett (1872-1947)</th>
<th>m.</th>
<th>Hartley Dennett (1870-1936)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carleton (1900-1995)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Appleton (1903-1903)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Devon (1905-1960)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## B: Chronology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Who/What</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Relationship to MWD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>~1580-1628</td>
<td>Peter Coffin (m. Joanna Thember)</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Maternal great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1609-1681</td>
<td>Tristram Coffin (m. Dionis Stephens)</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Maternal great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather and founder of American Coffin line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1625-n.d.</td>
<td>Judith Greenleaf, a.k.a. Sommerby (2nd husband Tristram Coffin, Jr)</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Maternal great, great, great, great, great, grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1632-1703</td>
<td>Tristram Coffin, Jr. (m. Judith Greenleaf)</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Maternal great, great, great, great, great, grandfather; son of Tristram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1642</td>
<td>Tristram Coffin</td>
<td>Emigrated to Salisbury MA</td>
<td>Maternal great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather and founder of American Coffin line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1669-1749</td>
<td>Nathaniel Coffin (m. Sarah Dole a.k.a. Sarah Brocklebank)</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Maternal great, great, great, great, great, grandfather; son of Tristram, Jr. and Dionis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1694-1762</td>
<td>John Coffin (m. Judith Greenleaf)</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Maternal great, great, great, great, grandfather; son of Nathaniel and Sarah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1722-1789</td>
<td>Captain Peter Coffin (m. Rebecca Hazeltine)</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Maternal great, great grandfather; son of John and Judith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1763-1833</td>
<td>Levi Coffin</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1777-n.d.</td>
<td>Rebecca Hazeltine Coffin</td>
<td>Made shirts for soldiers</td>
<td>Maternal great, great grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1777-1853</td>
<td>Thomas Coffin (m. Hannah Kilburn &amp; Hannah Bartlet)</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Maternal great grandfather; son of Peter and Rebecca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1816-1880</td>
<td>Nathan Plummer Ames (m. Elvira Coffin)</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Maternal grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1819-1861</td>
<td>Elvira Coffin Ames (m. Nathan Plummer Ames)</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Maternal grandmother; daughter of Thomas and Hannah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1823-1886</td>
<td>Charles Carleton Coffin</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Maternal great Uncle; son of Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Who/What</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Relationship to MWD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1834-1882</td>
<td>George Whitefield Ware</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1839</td>
<td>Charles Goodyear</td>
<td>Invented vulcanization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1843-n.d.</td>
<td>Livonia Coffin Ware</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Mother; daughter of Elvira &amp; Nathan Ames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1847-1911</td>
<td>Charles Henry Ames Coffin</td>
<td></td>
<td>Maternal uncle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844-1915</td>
<td>Anthony Comstock</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Rival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856-1936</td>
<td>Lucia True Ames Mead</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Maternal aunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844-1915</td>
<td>Anthony Comstock</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Rival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>Elvira Coffin Ames and Nathan Plummer Ames</td>
<td>Joined community at West Creek Indiana</td>
<td>Maternal grandparents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1869</td>
<td>National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA)</td>
<td>Founded by Cady Stanton and Anthony</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1869</td>
<td>American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA)</td>
<td>Founded by Lucy and Henry Stone, Julia Ward Howe and Thomas Wentworth Higginson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870-n.d.</td>
<td>William Bradford Ware</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>Fifteenth Amendment</td>
<td>Reconstruction amendment prohibiting race, color, or previous condition of servitude as a reason to exclude voting rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1872-1947</td>
<td>Mary Coffin Ware Dennett (MWD)</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1873-(died in infancy)</td>
<td>Richard Coffin Ware Hill</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1873</td>
<td>Comstock’s Obscenity Law enacted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1874</td>
<td>Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) launched</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1876-n.d.</td>
<td>Clara Winnifred Coffin Ware Hill</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18890</td>
<td>The National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) are reunited under the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891-1894</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Attended School of Art &amp; Design at Boston Museum of Fine Arts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894-1897</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Taught at Drexel Institute of Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897-Feb.</td>
<td>Hartley Dennett</td>
<td>Trip to Europe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897-June</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Trip to Europe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898-1907</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Worked to revive the lost art of cordovan gilded leathers wall hangings” Helped organize first Arts and Crafts Society in U.S</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Who/What</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Relationship to MWD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>MWD and Hartley Dennett</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-1995</td>
<td>Carleton Dennett</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903-1903</td>
<td>Appleton Dennett (Died at 3 weeks)</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Resigned BSAC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905-1960</td>
<td>Devon Dennett</td>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>Son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Became Field Secretary, MA Suffrage Association</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>Hartley Dennett</td>
<td>Permanently deserted MWD</td>
<td>Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Elected secretary of National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) Acting President Twilight Sleep Association</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Filed for divorce</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Chair of committee on New Votes – a Single Tax organization Divorce granted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alice Paul and Lucy Burns</td>
<td>Organized the Congressional Union, a.k.a. the National Woman’s Party</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NAWSA</td>
<td>First women’s suffrage parade in DC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Resigned from NAWSA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women’s Peace Party</td>
<td>Marched in NYC to protest the war</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>With Jessie Ashley and Clara Gruening Stillman, founded The National Birth Control League.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Wrote <em>The Sex Side of Life</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Helped organize The Twilight Sleep Association</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lucia Ames Mead</td>
<td>Delegate to Woman’s Peace Conference at the Hague</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915-1918</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Led The National Birth Control League</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Executive Secretary of Women’s Committee to re-elect Wilson Field secretary for the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM),</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916-1917</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>National Secretary for the League for Progressive Democracy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Entered the War</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Executive Secretary of the National Birth Control League</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Board of Woman’s Peace Party</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Published <em>The Sex Side of Life</em> in Medical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Who/What</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Relationship to MWD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td></td>
<td>Review of Reviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>VPL</td>
<td>Organized Voluntary Parenthood League</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Nineteenth Amendment ratified</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>On Board of National Council of International Free Trade</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td></td>
<td>Director on Board of Free Trade League</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926-1927</td>
<td></td>
<td>Special Representative for Homeopathy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td></td>
<td>Arrested for obscenity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td></td>
<td>Convicted for sending obscene material through the mail</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td></td>
<td>Conviction reversed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>United States v. One Package decision</td>
<td>Birth control legalized through doctors only legislation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References Consulted for Timeline

By One of Them, *Trustrum*, 1881, 11.


Chronological listings of MWD activities, 1891-1928, undated, Reel 1, MWD Papers

Coffin, The History of Boscawen and Webster 1878, 491-495.

Coffin, The Life of Tristram Coffin, 1881.

*Coffin, The Life of Tristram Coffin, 1881.*

*Constitution of the United States Amendments 11-27,*


www.ancestry.com (accessed February 6, 2011)


Kimball, The Samual Ames Family, 1890


Nantucket Historical Association, *Barney Geneological Record.*

*The New York Times,* “Mrs. Dennett Freed on Sex Booklet Case,” March 4, 1930
**APPENDIX**

**C: Key To Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABCL</td>
<td>American Birth Control League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACLU</td>
<td>American Civil Liberties Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASHA</td>
<td>American Social Hygiene Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUAM</td>
<td>American Union Against Militarism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AWSA</td>
<td>American Woman Suffrage Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSAC</td>
<td>Boston Society for Arts and Crafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MWSA</td>
<td>Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MWD</td>
<td>Mary Ware Dennett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAWSA</td>
<td>National American Woman Suffrage Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCLB</td>
<td>National Civil Liberties Bureau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBCL</td>
<td>National Birth Control League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWSA</td>
<td>National Woman Suffrage Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSWSC</td>
<td>Southern State Woman Suffrage Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USPHS</td>
<td>United States Public Health Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VPL</td>
<td>Voluntary Parenthood League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCTU</td>
<td>Women’s Christian Temperance Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WPP</td>
<td>Women’s Peace Party</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX

D: The Sex Side of Life

THE SEX SIDE
OF LIFE

An Explanation for Young People

BY

MARY WARE DENNETT
Copyright, 1919,
By Mary Ware Dennett

Sixth Printing

Extra copies of this booklet may be had at
the following rates from the author

Mrs. Mary Ware Dennett
81 Singer Street
Astoria, Long Island, New York

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Single copies</th>
<th>$0.25 each</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orders of five</td>
<td>.20 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; ten</td>
<td>.18 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; fifty</td>
<td>.16 1/3 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; one hundred</td>
<td>.15 &quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE SEX SIDE OF LIFE FIRST APPEARED IN THE Medical Review of Reviews for February, 1918. THE FOLLOWING IS QUOTED FROM THE EDITOR'S FOREWORD.

We have come across so much rubbish on this subject that we drifted into the conclusion that an honest sex essay for young folks would not be produced by this generation.

Recently there came to this desk a manuscript bearing the title The Sex Side of Life and the sub-title An Explanation for Young People, written by Mary Ware Dennett. No editor ever confesses that he reads an article with prejudice, but we will admit that we expected this MS would be "returned with thanks." It was reasonable to suppose that a laywoman would not succeed where physicians had failed. Even after we had read the introduction we were not convinced, for we have met several books whose texts do not fulfill the promises made by the preface. But after reading a few pages of the essay itself, we realized we were listening to the music of a different drummer. Instead of the familiar notes of fear and pretense, we were surprised to hear the clarion call of truth.

Mary Ware Dennett's Sex Side of Life is "on the level." In the pages of the Medical Review of Reviews, her essay will reach only the profession, but we sincerely hope that this splendid contribution will be reprinted in pamphlet form and distributed by thousands to the general public. We are tolerably familiar with Anglo-American writings on sexology, but we know nothing that equals Mrs. Dennett's brochure. Physicians and social workers are frequently asked: "What shall I say to my growing child?" Mary Ware Dennett, in her rational sex primer, at last furnishes a satisfactory answer.

V. R.

(RECAP)

595240
THE SEX SIDE OF LIFE

INTRODUCTION FOR ELDERS

In reading several dozen books on sex matters for the young with a view to selecting the best for my own children, I found none that I was willing to put into their hands, without first guarding them against what I considered very misleading and harmful impressions, which they would otherwise be sure to acquire in reading them. That is the excuse for this article.

It is far more specific than most sex information written for young people. I believe we owe it to children to be specific if we talk about the subject at all.

From a careful observation of youthful curiosity and a very vivid recollection of my own childhood, I have tried to explain frankly the points about which there is the greatest inquiry. These points are not frankly or clearly explained in most sex literature. They are avoided, partly from embarrassment, but more, apparently, because those who have undertaken to instruct the children are not really clear in their own minds as to the proper status of the sex relation.

I found that from the physiological point of view, the question was handled with limitations and reservations. From the point of natural science it was often handled with sentimentality, the child being led from a semi-esthetic study of the reproduction of flowers and animals to the acceptance of a similar idea for human beings. From the moral point of view it was handled least satisfactorily of all, the child being given a jumble of conflicting ideas, with no means of correlating them,—fear of venereal disease, one's duty to suppress "animal passion," the sacredness of marriage, and
so forth. And from the emotional point of view, the subject was not handled at all.

This one omission seems to me to be the key to the whole situation, and it is the basis of the radical departure I have made from the precedents in most sex literature for children.

Concerning all four points of view just mentioned, there are certain departures from the traditional method that have seemed to me worth making.

On the physiological side I have given, as far as possible, the proper terminology for the sex organs and functions. Children have had to read the expurgated literature which has been specially prepared for them in poetic or colloquial terms, and then are needlessly mystified when they hear things called by their real names.

On the side of natural science, I have emphasized our unlikeliness to the plants and animals rather than our likeness, for while the points we have in common with the lower orders make an interesting section in our general education, it is knowing about the vital points in which we differ that helps us to solve the sexual problems of maturity; and the child needs that knowledge precisely as he needs knowledge of everything which will fortify him for wise decisions when he is grown.

On the moral side, I have tried to avoid confusion and dogmatism in the following ways: by eliminating fear of venereal disease as an appeal for strictly limited sex relations, stating candidly that venereal disease is becoming curable; by barring out all mention of "brute" or "animal" passion, terms frequently used in pleas for chastity and self control, as such talk is an aspersion on the brutes and has done children much harm in giving them the impression that there is an essential baseness in the sex relation; by inviting the inference that marriage is "sacred" by virtue of its being a reflection of human ideality rather than because it is a legalized institution.

Unquestionably the stress which most writers have laid upon the beauty of nature's plans for perpetuating the plant and animal species, and the effort to have the child carry
over into human life some sense of that beauty has come from a most commendable instinct to protect the child from the natural shock of the revelation of so much that is unesthetic and revolting in human sex life. The nearness of the sex organs to the excretory organs, the pain and messiness of childbirth are elements which certainly need some compensating antidote to prevent their making too disagreeable and disproportionate an impress on the child's mind.

The results are doubtless good as far as they go, but they do not go nearly far enough. What else is there to call upon to help out? Why, the one thing which has been persistently neglected by practically all the sex writers,—the emotional side of sex experience. Parents and teachers have been afraid of it and distrustful of it. In not a single one of all the books for young people that I have thus far read has there been the frank, unashamed declaration that the climax of sex emotion is an unsurpassed joy, something which rightly belongs to every normal human being, a joy to be proudly and serenely experienced. Instead there has been all too evident an inference that sex emotion is a thing to be ashamed of, that yielding to it is indulgence which must be curbed as much as possible, that all thought and understanding of it must be rigorously postponed, at any rate till after marriage.

We give to young folks, in their general education, as much as they can grasp of science and ethics and art, and yet in their sex education, which rightly has to do with all of these, we have said, "Give them only the bare physiological facts, lest they be prematurely stimulated." Others of us, realizing that the bare physiological facts are shocking to many a sensitive child, and must somehow be softened with something pleasant, have said, "Give them the facts, yes, but see to it that they are so related to the wonders of evolution and the beauties of the natural world that the shock is minimized." But none of us has yet dared to say, "Yes, give them the facts, give them the nature study, too, but also give them some conception of sex life as a vivifying joy, as a vital art, as a thing to be studied and developed with
reverence for its big meaning, with understanding of its far-reaching reactions, psychologically and spiritually, with temperant restraint, good taste and the highest idealism.” We have contented ourselves by assuming that marriage makes sex relations respectable. We have not yet said that it is only beautiful sex relations that can make marriage lovely.

Young people are just as capable of being guided and inspired in their thought about sex emotion as in their taste and ideals in literature and ethics, and just as they imperatively need to have their general taste and ideals cultivated as a preparation for mature life, so do they need to have some understanding of the marvelous place which sex emotion has in life.

Only such an understanding can be counted on to give them the self control that is born of knowledge, not fear, the reverence that will prevent premature or trivial connections, the good taste and finesse that will make their sex life when they reach maturity a vitalizing success.

AN EXPLANATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

When boys and girls get into their “teens,” a side of them begins to wake up which has been asleep or only partly developed ever since they were born, that is, the sex side of them. It is the most wonderful and interesting part of growing up. This waking is partly of the mind, partly of the body and partly of the feelings or emotions.

You can't help wanting to understand all about it, but somehow you find yourself a little embarrassed in asking all the questions that come into your mind, and often you don't feel quite like talking about it freely, even to your father and mother. Sometimes it is easier to talk with your best friends, because they are your own age, and are beginning to have these new feelings too.

But remember that young people don't know nearly so much about it as older people do, and that the older ones really want to help you with their experience and advice; and yet, they, like you, often feel rather embarrassed them-
selves and don't know how to go about it. I suppose it is because it is all so very personal and still remains somewhat mysterious, in spite of all that people know about it.

If our bodies were just like machines, then we could learn about them and manage them quite scientifically as we do automobiles, but they are not like that. They are more than machines that have to be supplied with fuel (food) and kept clean and oiled (by bathing, exercise and sleep). They are the homes of our souls and our feelings, and that makes all the difference in the world in the way we act, and it makes what we have to learn, not limited to science only, but it has to include more difficult and complicated things like psychology and morality.

Maybe I can't make this article help you, but I remember so well what I wanted to know and how I felt when I was young that I am now going to try. And I will tell you to start out with that there is a great deal that nobody knows yet, in spite of the fact that the human race has been struggling thousands of years to learn.

Life itself is still a mystery, especially human life. Human life, in many respects, is like plant and animal life, but in many ways it is entirely different, and the ways in which it is different are almost more important for us to think about than the ways in which it is similar. In all life, except in the very lowest forms, new life is created by the coming together, in a very close and special way, of the male and female elements. You have studied at school about the plants and you probably have observed certain of the animals, so you know something about what this means if you do not understand it thoroughly.

But what you want to know most of all is just how it is with human beings. You want to know just what this coming together is, how it is done, how it starts the new life, the baby, and how the baby is born. You want to understand the wonderful sex organs, that are different in men and women, what each part is for and how it works.

If you feel very curious and excited and shy about it, don't let yourself be a bit worried or ashamed. Your feel-
ings are quite natural, and most everybody else has felt just the same way at your age. Remember that strong feelings are immensely valuable to us. All we need to do is to steer them in the right direction and keep them well balanced and proportioned.

Now in order to understand something of why this subject stirs us so, we must notice in what ways we human beings are different from the plants and animals. About the lowest form of life is the amoeba. It looks like a little lump of jelly, and it produces its young by merely separating itself in two. One part drifts off from the other part and each becomes a separate live being. There is no male and no female and they didn't know they were doing it. In the plants a higher stage of development is reached: there is the male and the female and they join together, not by coming to each other, or because they know they belong together, but quite unconsciously, with the aid of the bees and other insects and the wind, the male part is carried to the female part—they mix, and at once the seed of a new plant begins to grow.

Then come to the animals. In all higher forms of animal life, the male creature comes to the female creature and himself places within her body the germ which, when it meets the egg which is waiting for it, immediately makes a new life begin to grow. But the animals come together without knowing why. They do it from instinct only, and they do it in what is called the mating season, which is usually in the spring. The mating season happens once a year among most of the higher animals, like birds and wild cattle, but to some animals it comes several times a year like the rabbits, for instance. You doubtless know already that the more highly developed the animal, the longer it takes the young one to grow before it is born, and the longer the period when it is helpless to provide its own food and care.

Now we come to human beings, and see how different they are! They have no regular mating season, and while there is a certain amount of instinct in men and women
which tends to bring them together, the sex impulse among highly developed people is far more the result of their feeling of love for each other than mere animal instinct alone. Many of the animals make no choice at all in their mating. Any near-by female will do for the male. But among some of the higher animals the male has a special instinct for a certain female, and the female will not tolerate any but a certain male. Most of the animals have different mates every season, though there are a few kinds where the male and female, once having mated, remain mates for years, sometimes even for life. But it is only human beings whose mating is what we call “falling in love,” and that is an experience far beyond anything that the animals know.

It means that a man and a woman feel that they belong to each other in a way that they belong to no one else; it makes them wonderfully happy to be together; they find they want to live together, work together, play together, and to have children together, that is, to marry each other; and their dream is to be happy together all their lives. Sometimes the dream does not come true, and there is much failure and unhappiness, but just the same people go right on trying to make it a success, because it is what they care most for.

The sex attraction is the strongest feeling that human beings know, and unlike the animals, it is far more than a mere sensation of the body. It takes in the emotions and the mind and the soul, and that is why our happiness is so dependent upon it.

When a man and a woman fall in love so that they really belong to each other, the physical side of the relation is this: both of them feel at intervals a peculiar thrill or glow, particularly in the sexual organs, and it naturally culminates after they have gone to bed at night. The man’s special sex organ or penis, becomes enlarged and stiffened, instead of soft and limp as ordinarily, and thus it easily enters the passage in the woman’s body called the vagina or birth-canal, which leads to the uterus or womb, which as perhaps you already know is the sac in which the
egg or embryo grows into a baby. The penis and the vagina are about the same size, as Nature intended them to fit each other. By a rhythmic movement of the penis in and out, the sex act reaches an exciting climax or orgasm, when there is for the woman a peculiarly satisfying contraction of the muscles of the passage and for the man, the expulsion of the semen, the liquid which contains the germs of life. This is followed by a sensation of peaceful happiness and sleepy relaxation. It is the very greatest physical pleasure to be had in all human experience, and it helps very much to increase all other kinds of pleasure also. It is at this time that married people not only are closest to each other physically, but they feel closer to each other in every other way too. It is then most of all that they feel sure they belong to each other.

The sex act is called by various names, such as coitus, coition, copulation, cohabitation, sex-intercourse, the sex-embrace, etc. But all these terms refer to the same thing. The first coitus is apt to be somewhat painful for the woman, as there is usually a thin membrane, called the hymen, partly closing the vagina which has to be broken through, but all women do not have it and it varies in size and thickness with different people.

Without the sex act, no babies could be created, for it is by this means only that the semen which contains the male part of the germ of life can meet the ovum or the female part of the germ of life. When the two parts come together in the woman’s body under just the right conditions, a baby begins to grow—at first so tiny that it could hardly be seen without a microscope, and finally, after nine months’ growth in the uterus or womb of the mother till it weighs about seven or eight pounds, it is born, a live human being. The birth process is called labor, and it is indeed labor, for it usually means much pain and struggle for the mother, although the baby’s journey from the uterus to the world is only a few inches. It takes anywhere from an hour to two days for a baby to be born. Doctors are learning more and more how to lessen the pain, and by
the end of another generation it ought to be possible for child-birth to be practically painless for most women. By that time people will more generally understand how to have babies only when they want them and can afford them. At present, unfortunately, it is against the law to give people information as to how to manage their sex relations so that no baby will be created unless the father and mother are ready and glad to have it happen.

Now you must understand something about this intricate sexual machinery. Plate 1 shows the woman's organs and Plate 2 the man's. Both these illustrations are sections, as if the body were cut in two vertically.

Sometimes it seems very distasteful to us that the sex or generative organs should be placed so near to what we might call our "sewerage system." We do not like to have to connect in our thought anything so sweet and nice as a baby or so happy and precious as the sex embrace with the waste of our bodies, which we want to be rid of with as little thought as possible, as it is disagreeable at best, and we wonder why we were created this way. But we have to remember that the sex organs are very delicate and they are probably placed where they can best be protected from injury. It would be hard to think of any other part of the body that would be safer than just this place. At any rate there they are, and our duty is to understand them as best we can, and take mighty good care of them as our most wonderful possession.

Looking at Plate 1, you will see that the woman's body provides the egg or ovum. These grow, many thousands of them, in two small sacs called ovaries, and every little while (usually every four weeks, but not always) an ovum ripens and passes out from the ovary through the fallopian tube (there are two of these, one leading from each ovary) into the uterus or womb, a process which takes several days. Here it may be met by the male life element, and if so, it becomes fertilized and remains in the uterus to grow into a baby. This is called fertilization, fecundation, impregnation or conception. But if the egg is not fertilized,
Plate One

1. Backbone.
2. Rectum, which carries away the solid waste matter from the bowels.
3. Anus, the opening of the rectum.
4. Bladder, which holds the waste water or urine.
5. Ovary, in which grows the ovum or egg.
6. Fallopian tube, which carries the ovum to the uterus.
7. Uterus or Womb, in which the egg or ovum grows into a baby.
8. Mouth of the Uterus, through which the semen has to go to meet the ovum.
9. Vagina or Birth Canal, into which the penis fits during the sex act.
10. Entrance to the Vagina.
11. Entrance to the Urethra, which carries away the waste water or urine.

Plate Two

1. Backbone.
2. Rectum, which carries away the solid waste matter from the bowels.
3. Anus, the opening of the rectum.
4. Bladder, which holds the waste water or urine.
5. Penis, which fits into the vagina, during the sex act.
6. Prepuce, or foreskin.
7. Scrotum, the bag which holds the testicles.
8. Testicles, in which grow the spermatozoa, or germs of life.
9. Vas Deferens, which carries the spermatozoa to the urethra.
11. Seminal Vesicle.
Both 10 and 11 secrete liquids that make part of the semen, and which nourish the spermatozoa.
12. Urethra, which carries the spermatozoa, also the urine.
13. Cowper's Gland, which secretes a liquid which makes the urethra alkaline.
14. One of the spermatozoa, or germs of life, much magnified.
it passes from the uterus through the vagina and out of the body. The ovaries take turns in developing the ovum.

Every twenty-eight days or so a woman, from the time she is about thirteen or fourteen till she is about fifty, has a slight flow of blood from the uterus, which is called menstruation. The reasons for this are not wholly understood, but it is supposed there is an extra supply of blood provided periodically for the growth of a baby, but when there is no baby starting to grow, the blood is not needed so it flows away (about once in four weeks). Often the unfertilized ovum is carried away with it, but the two things do not necessarily happen at the same time. Menstruation lasts from three to five days and young girls sometimes have pain then and feel languid and "unwell." If so they should be quieter than usual and avoid cold baths and getting their feet wet. But menstruation is not an illness, and a girl in perfect health finds it only a slight inconvenience.

The ovaries not only produce the egg, but they also produce a secretion that is absorbed by the blood and which is most necessary in the development of a girl into a woman. It has an almost magical effect in adding the specially womanly qualities to the body and character.

Looking at Plate 2, you will see the man's sex machinery. The testicles are to a man what the ovaries are to a woman. They are two sacs held in a bag of rather thin loose skin called the scrotum, and it is here that the sperm (spermatozoa) or germ of life grows. Just how no one really knows. The spermatozoa are very tiny and the testicles hold many thousands of them. Under the microscope they show a sort of head and tail like a pollywog. They are very much alive and move by a rapid wiggling of the tail part.

Leading from each testicle is a tube called the vas deferens, through which the sperm goes at the time of the sex act on its way out to meet the ovum in the woman's body. On the way it is joined by two other liquids, one secreted by the seminal vesicles (of which there are two) and the
other by the prostate gland. These three liquids together form the semen, which at the times of sexual excitement is forced out through the penis into the vagina of the woman.

You will notice that the woman has separate tubes for the urine (waste water) and the sex function, but the man uses the same tube for both: that is, in the woman the bladder which holds the urine is emptied by a separate tube, the urethra, while in the man the urethra not only empties the bladder, but it also carries the semen.

The use of the seminal vesicles and the prostate gland is to supply a means of nourishment for the spermatozoa until they reach the ovum, which may not be for several days after the semen is expelled into the vagina.

Then there are two small glands called Cowper's glands, which make the passage in the penis alkaline, as the spermatozoa can only remain alive in an alkaline secretion and the urine is acid, so always just before the penis forces out the semen, the secretion from Cowper's glands goes ahead to protect the sperm from being destroyed by any remaining traces of the acid urine.

At the end of the penis is a fold or cap of skin, the prepuce, which the doctor often removes for the sake of the boy's health, a process called circumcision, and it is a great relief to boys whose prepuce or foreskin is too tight as to make difficulty in keeping clean. All Jewish babies are regularly circumcised, a custom dating way back to Bible times.

There is a constant internal secretion from the testicles of a man just as from the ovaries of a woman, and it has the same beneficial effect on the whole being. It makes a boy what we call manly or virile. The value of the internal secretions of the sex organs in both boys and girls is so great that for that reason, if for no other, the whole sex machinery must be kept in perfect health.

Boys have a certain discomfort to bear which is difficult for them just as menstruation is difficult for girls. But by knowing the meaning of things and by taking care of themselves, they need not be seriously troubled by it. Every
once in a while as they are growing up, but before they
are old enough to really fall in love and marry and have
children, boys feel a sort of stirring of the sex organs—
sometimes so much so that it makes them quite uneasy
and anxious for relief. The thing to do is to keep as calm
as possible and keep very busy and very healthy. Then
the discomfort will not be too great, and nature will usually
bring relief by letting the accumulated semen pass off dur-
ing sleep. This is called a seminal emission, and is per-
fectly harmless. Sometimes a vivid sexual dream comes
with it, but that too will do no harm, unless a boy lets his
mind dwell on it till the excitement grows unnatural. This
emission may happen every two weeks or so, but it is not a
regular thing. Boys are sometimes alarmed and fear their
sex machinery is out of order, but it is a perfectly natural
thing, and only means that the organs are relieving them-
selves of the extra secretions that are not needed till the
time comes for the real sex relation.

Boys and girls sometimes get the habit of handling their
sex organs so as to get them excited. This is called mas-
turbation or self-abuse. It is also called auto-erotism.
Such handling can be made to result in a climax something
like that of the natural sex act. For generations this habit
has been considered wrong and dangerous, but recently
many of the best scientists have concluded that the chief
harm has come from the worry caused by doing it, when
one believed it to be wrong. This worry has often been so
great that real illness, both of the mind and body has re-
sulted. There is no occasion for worry unless the habit is
carried to excess. But remember that until you are mature,
the sex secretions are specially needed within your body,
and if you use them wastefully before you are grown, you
are depriving your body of what it needs. So do not stim-
ulate your sex organs into action intentionally. And do
not yield to the impulse to handle the sex organs in order
to relieve the pressure which may occasionally feel over-
whelming, unless you find that nature does not bring you
relief during sleep.
Remember always that your whole sex machinery is more easily put out of order than any other part of your body, and it must be treated with great care and respect all along. It is not fair to ourselves or to each other to do a single thing that will make us either weak or unnatural. Remember that your sex organs have a very powerful, even if invisible, effect upon your whole being, and up to the time that you are really old enough to love some one to whom you want to actually belong, you must let your sex machinery grow strong and ready for its good, happy work when the right time comes. The sex organs during your youth do not need frequent exercise in the same sense that your muscles do. They are active all the time with their internal secretions which strengthen both you and them.

Don’t ever let any one drag you into nasty talk or thought about sex. It is not a nasty subject. It should mean everything that is highest and best and happiest in human life, but it can be easily perverted and ruined and made the cause of horrible suffering of both mind and body.

There are two very terrible sexual diseases—syphilis and gonorrhea. They are both frightfully infectious and very difficult to cure. These diseases are usually acquired by sex contact with a diseased person, but they can also be gotten by using public drinking cups, towels, water-closets, or in any way by which an infected moist article can come in contact with one’s skin. The worst thing about these diseases is that they are such invisible enemies. After the outside appearance of the disease is gone, they often go reaching farther and farther into the body, making awful results that hang on for years. Men who get diseased frequently give the infection to their wives, often causing them to be so ill that surgical operations are necessary, by which their sex organs are so crippled that they can never be mothers; and, worst of all, innocent unborn babies are infected and come into the world sick or deformed or blind.

Men often get these dreadful diseases by having sex re-
lations with women who are called prostitutes or "bad women," that is, they are women who are not in love with any one, but who make money by selling their sex relations to men who pay for them. Many prostitutes become diseased, and there is, as yet, no way for either them or the men who visit them to be positively safe from infection. But the doctors are making progress in their study of these diseases, and they are finding out how to control and cure them, just as they have in the case of tuberculosis.

But even if presently these venereal diseases, as they are called, can be entirely cured and prevented, prostitution will still remain a thing to hate. For the idea of sex relations between people who do not love each other, who do not feel any sense of belonging to each other, will always be revolting to highly developed, sensitive people.

People's lives grow finer and their characters better, if they have sex relations only with those they love. And those who make the wretched mistake of yielding to the sex impulse alone when there is no love to go with it, usually live to despise themselves for their weakness and their bad taste. They are always ashamed of doing it, and they try to keep it secret from their families and those they respect. You can be sure that whatever people are ashamed to do is something that can never bring them real happiness. It is true that one's sex relations are the most personal and private matters in the world, and they belong just to us and to no one else, but while we may be shy and reserved about them, we are not ashamed.

When two people really love each other, they don't care who knows it. They are proud of their happiness. But no man is ever proud of his connection with a prostitute and no prostitute is ever proud of her business.

Sex relations belong to love, and love is never a business. Love is the nicest thing in the world, but it can't be bought. And the sex side of it is the biggest and most important side of it, so it is the one side of us that we must be absolutely sure to keep in good order and perfect health, if we are going to be happy ourselves or make any one else happy.
WORKS SITED

Primary Sources


Brooks, Dr. Phillips. “Christmas 1904.” MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 11, December 1904.


Carey, A. Arthur. “Letter to Mary Ware Dennett,” MWD Papers, Folder 139, Reel 7, October 31, 1903.

Carey, Arthur A. “Letter to Mary Ware Dennett.” Massachusetts: MWD Papers, Reel 7, Folder 139, January 1, 1904.


—. “Letter to Mary Ware Dennett.” MWD Papers, Folder 139, November 15, 1903.


Chase, Margaret. “Letter from Margaret Chase to Mary Ware Dennett, March 5, 1908.” MWD Papers, Reel 2, Folder 18, March 5, 1908.


*Constitution of the United States Amendments 11-27.*

Current Opinion. “Sex Education As Its Friends and Its Foes View It.” *American Periodicals Online* LV, no. 4 (October 1913).


Dennett, Mary Ware. *Letter to sons, Carleton and Devon.* Washington, DC: MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 12, April 7, 1913.

—. *Letter to son, Carleton.* Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 12, April 28, 1913.

—. “Address Before the Penn Federation of Women's Clubs.” Scranton: MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 208, October 1910.

Dennett, Mary Ware. “Aesthetics and Ethics.” (Boston Society of Arts and Crafts) 1, no. 2 (May 1902).


—. “Critique of Prize-Winning Sex Education Pamphlet.” MWD Papers, Reel 2, Folder 26, August 26, 1916.


—. “Introduction for Elders to The Sex Side of Life, An Explanation for Young People.” 24, no. 2 (February 1918).

—. “Letter to Alice Paul.” NWP Papers, Reel I The Suffrage Years, January 14, 1914.


—. “Letter to Anna Shaw.” MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 211, 212, August 17, 1912.

—. “Letter to Arthur Astor Carey.” Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 7, Folder 139, August 2, 1903.

—. “Letter to Aunt Lucia Ames Mead.” MWD Papers, Reel 1, n.d.

—. “Letter to Aunt Lucia Ames Mead.” MWD Papers, Reel 1, May 5, 1935.


—. “Letter to Dearest Lads.” MWD Papers, Reel 1, March 1916.


—. “Letter to Lads (Sons).” MWD Papers, October 31, 1915.


—. “Letter to Member of the Board.” New York: MWD Papers, Reel 11, Folder 214, October 15, 1914.

—. “Letter to Member of the Official Board.” MWD Papers, Reel 11, Folder 214, April 4, 1914.

—. “Letter to Member of the Official Board.” New York: MWD Papers, Reel 11, Folder 214, April 14, 1914.


—. “Letter to Mr. Foster.” MWD Papers, Reel 2, Folder 26, August 1, 1916.

—. “Letter to Mrs. Laidlaw.” MWD Papers, Reel 11, Folder 214, April 28, 1914.

—. “Letter to Official Board Member.” MWD Papers, Reel 11, Folder 214, April 18, 1914.


—. “Letter to Son Carleton.” MWD Papers Reel 1, Folder 16, January 10, 1915

—. “Letter to son, Carleton.” MWD Papers, Reel 1, folder 15, 1919.


—. “Letter to Sons.” MWD Papers, February 27, 1914

—. “Letter to the Editor of the Freewoman.” New York: MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 210, April 17, 1912.


—. “Letter to Walter Prichard Eastman, in response to newspaper article praising great uncle, Charles.” Boston, 1933: MWD Papers, Reel 1.


—. “Notes to grandson, Peter Vaughan Dennett, on stationary from 24-30 29th St., formerly 82 Singer St. typewritten.” MWD Papers, Reel 1, n.d.

—. “On Mary Ware Dennett.” MWD Papers, Folder 9, n.d.

—. “Re: Mary Ware Dennett, Biographical Notes.” MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folders 1, 9, ~1930.

—. “Report About the National Birth Control League.” MWD Papers, Reel 14, Folder 279, ~1918.


—. “The Case for Birth Control.” The Arbiter, August 1918.
—. The Sex Side of Life, an Explanation for Young People, written 1915. The author, 1918.
—. “The Simplicity of the Suffrage Question.” MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 214, April-November 1914.
—. “Undated Manuscript in Chen.” ~1915.

Dennett, Mary Ware, NBCL. “Letter to Dear Friend.” MWD Papers, Reel 11, Folders 269, December 18, 1918.


Dennett, William Hartley. “Hartley Dennett, miscellaneous love poems, in envelope marked "Before the Change, ~1894-1897, "Margaret Chase Perry Archives.” Chen, Mary Ware Dennett, 1996.


Eliot, Charles William; Carnegie, Andrew; Holmes, Oliver Wendell *Correspondence with Edwin Mead*. MWD Papers, reel I, Various.

Gallert, Mary Ware Dennett and Myra. “Letter to Friends of the VPL.”


Greer, Joseph H. M.D. *The Sex Side of Life*. M. Stein, 1929.


“What Hearing before F. W Sallinger, Esq., in the matter of custody of children in the case of Dennett v. Dennett, Testimony on behalf of the libellant by Katharine Ware Smith.” *MWD Papers, reel i, Folder 17*. Boston, February 15, 1913.


Lehr, Stella. “A Possible Explanation of the Conflicting Reports On Twilight Sleep, Read before the Alameda County Medical Association, January 1915.” California State Journal of Medicine, June 1915.


Merriam, Mr. “Direct Examination of Dr. Patch at the Hearing before F. W. Dallinger, Esq., in the matter of custody of children in Dennett v. Dennett.” MWD Papers, Reel 2, Folder 17. February 15-21, 1913.


Nelson, Caroline. “Letter to Dennett.” MWD Papers, Reel 19, April 1, 1930.


Patch, Dr. Frank V. “Direct Examination at hearing before F.W. Dallinger in the matter of custody of children in the case of Dennett v. Dennett.” Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 2, Folder 17, February 15-21, 1913.

“Portrait of members of the National American Woman Suffrage Association.” Boston, MA: Schlessinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, c 1917-1919.


President, Drexel. “Appointment Letter to Dennett from Drexel.” MWD Papers, Reel 1, December 12, 1894.

President's office, Drexel Institute of Art, Science and Industry. “Letter to Mary C. Ware.” reel 1, MWD Papers, December 12, 1894.


Robinson, William, M.D. *Pioneers of Birth Control.*

Sanger, Margaret. “A Victory, a New Year and a New Day.” *Birth Control Review* 3, no. 4 (February 1919).


Sargent, Irene. *Faculty Papers:* syracuse.syr.edu/edu/collections/faculty/sargent.html (accessed August 18, 2010).

Shaw, Anna Howard. “Letter to Mary Ware Dennett.” MWD Papers, Reel 11, Folder 214, August 30, 1914.


“Springfield Organization Week.” MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 203.


Stickley, Gustav. “Letter to Mary Ware Dennett Re: Craftsman article.” Syracuse: MWD Papers, Reel 9, Folder 179, April 11, 1903.


 Them, By One of. "Trustrum" and His Grandchildren. Nantucket: Published by the author, 1881.
“Thesbian Thirty, Drexel Institute, May 6 and May 7, 1897, Program.” Philadelphia: MWD Papers, Reel 56, Folder 125, 1897.


Thomas, M. Carey. “Letter to Anna Howard Shaw, President NAWSA.” MWD Papers, Reel 10, Folder 204, April 21, 1910.


Ware, Livonia Coffin. “Letter to Mary Coffin Ware Dennett.” MWD Papers, Reel 21, Folder 433, June 18, 1929

—. “Spring and Summer Tour, 1911.” MWD Papers, Reel 1, 1911.

Ware, Livonia Coffin. “Letter to Mary Coffin Ware Dennett.” MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folders 439-469, June, 1929.

Ware, Livonia. “Direct Examination of Mrs. Livonia C. Ware at Hearing before F.W. Dallinger, Esq., in the matter of custody of children in the case of Dennett v. Dennett.” Boston: MWD Papers, Reel 1, Folder 17, February 15-21, 1913.

Ware, Mary C. “Cremation.” MWD Papers, Reel 1, undated school assignment, ~1887, grade 10.

—. “Little Mrs. Payton.” MWD Papers, Reel 1, Undated fragment.

—. “The American Rush.” MWD Papers, Reel 1, ~1894, grade 10.

Ware, Mary Coffin. “Mary Coffin Ware to William Hartley Dennett, 30 October, 1896, Shobox Letters.” *Chen, Mary Ware Dennett*, 1996.

—. “Mary Coffin Ware to William Hartley Dennett, 27 September, 1896, Carleton Dennett Collection.” *Chen, Mary Ware Dennett*, 1996.

*Washington Post.* “Stattling Triangular Life Sanctioned by This Man.” December 7, 1913.


Secondary Sources


Alexander, Ruth M. “Review: Mary Ware Dennett's Pioneering Battle for Birth Control and Sex Education.” *the New England Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (September 1997).


*Bryn Mawr College Library.*


Chen, Constance. “Lucia Ames Mead to Mary Coffin Ware, 1-20 September 1926, shoe box letters in Chen, Mary Ware Dennett.” 1996.


Johnson, Kenneth R. “Kate Gordon and the Woman-Suffrage Movement in the South.” *The Journal of Southern History* (Southern Historical Association) 38, no. 3 (August 1972).


Kennedy, David M. *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger.* Hartford, CT: Yale University, 1970.


*Princeton University.* (accessed October 23, 2009).


Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University. Cambridge: MA.


Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Poster: *Clean youth won’t cause wife to suffer...*, Record number swhp0034.


**Archives**

Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America
Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study
Harvard University
10 Garden Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Boscawen Public Library
116 North Main Street
Boscawen, NH 03303