

THE TRUTH SEEKER

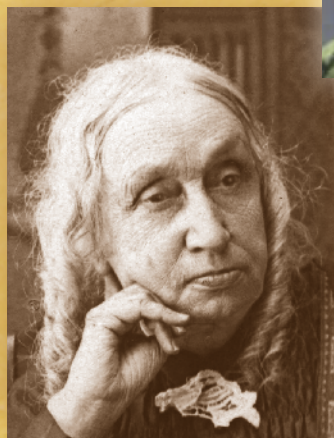
WORLD'S OLDEST FREETHOUGHT PUBLICATION

VOL. 143

FOUNDED BY D.M. BENNETT IN 1873

JANUARY - APRIL 2016

Heroines of American Freethought





NEW YORK SKYLINE, 1902

DEAR READER,

In 1873, D.M. Bennett decided to publish his own monthly magazine with the intention of providing a forum, not only for Free-thinkers, but for anyone who wanted to share their opinions on religion. Bennett came up with fifty possible names for the paper. At the top of his list was *The Truth Speaker*. His wife Mary, a prudent former school teacher, suggested a more modest title—*The Truth Seeker*.

In the 19th century, the press was dominated by male—mostly Christian—publishers and editors. Several periodicals, however, were edited by freethinking women, most notably *The Revolution* founded by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

In the annals of publishing history, **Mary Wicks Bennett** has yet to be acknowledged. Mrs. Bennett—who published our magazine during D.M. Bennett’s imprisonment and after his death—was one of the first female publishers in America. And perhaps even more significant, her *Truth Seeker* lasted more than a century longer than any other female-led, or for that matter, male-led periodicals founded in the 19th century. And for those historical reasons, we believe Mary Wicks Bennett rightly deserves her prominent place on our cover among all the other *Heroines of American Freethought*.

Once again our creative director and designer Francesca Smith has produced an attractive magazine worthy of this commemorative issue’s theme. Francesca provided her perspective on our focus on female freethinkers and she also represents the *Truth Seeker*’s torchbearer on our Contents page. It’s been nearly a century since the *Truth Seeker* featured a fresh face—and we think you’ll agree the new Contents page is more captivating than ever.

We learn about a few Freethought luminaries whose books were published by the Truth Seeker Company. The remarkable life of **Matilda Joslyn Gage**, author of *Woman, Church, and State*, is recounted by her fellow suffragists **Lucy Colman** and **Elizabeth Cady Stanton**. Professor and author **Kimberly A. Hamlin**, chronicles the life of **Helen H. Gardener**—“Ingersoll in Soprano”—whose *Men, Women, and Gods* was published by the Truth Seeker Company in 1885.

In this issue is a D.M. Bennett biography excerpt about the 1878 New York State Freethinkers’ convention in Watkins Glen. The attendees were the most Bohemian and radical Americans of the era. One of the iconoclastic speakers at Watkins Glen was Bible critic **Ella E. Gibson**, author of *The Godly Women of the Bible, By an Ungodly Woman of the Nineteenth Century* (published by The Truth Seeker Company). The event sounds like a 19th-century version of the Woodstock Music Festival and there were even arrests. Free love advocate **Josephine Tilton** and D.M. Bennett were arrested—for obscenity!

Speaking of Woodstock, counter-cultural icon **Paul Krassner** contributes an article about his 1960s underground abortion referral service. We pay tribute to the birth control pioneers associated

with the *Truth Seeker* and **Margaret Sanger**, who, like D.M. Bennett, challenged censorship laws and was arrested several times for violating the Comstock Act.

Who better to profile **Frances Wright**, known as the female Thomas Paine, than **Gary Berton**, Coordinator of the Institute for Thomas Paine Studies at Iona College in New Rochelle, New York. Philadelphia writer **Robert Helms** reveals new details about two tortured souls: free speech martyr **Ida Craddock** and **Voltaireine de Cleyre**, the anarchist, feminist, and freethinker. During a candid interview with another Pennsylvania native, atheist activist **Brigit Clarke-Smith**, the colorful Californian shares her personal philosophy and belief that “courage is more exhilarating than fear.”

Voula Papas describes the medieval views and barbaric treatment of women by Islamic fanatics who rely on their “holy” book for inspiration. **Cameron Filas** writes about the inhumane attitude toward women and the roots of the oppression in Christianity.

The film *Spotlight*, about the investigation into the rampant child abuse by Catholic priests in Boston is reviewed. Sordid sexual activity, coverups, and the organized crime committed by the

Roman Catholic church are certainly not new. Countless generations have been deeply damaged by pedophile priests and abusive nuns who’ve had their wicked way with women and children for centuries.

We begin this issue with an extract from our *American Freethought* film series, “The Heretical Abolitionists.” Atheist anti-slavery agitator **Ernestine Rose** asserted: “Emancipation from every kind of bondage is my principle. I go for the recognition of human rights, without distinction of sect, party, sex, or color.”

Since the Civil War, Christians have incessantly taken all the credit for the abolition of slavery. It’s true that some Christians—mostly Quakers led by **Lucretia Mott**—actively opposed slavery. Few if any of the established churches, however, took a

public stand against what freethinking abolitionists considered the “sum of all villainies.” In the opinion of former Congregational preacher **Samuel P. Putnam**, a Civil War Union army captain of a company of black soldiers: “It [the church] supported it, defended it, gave it the sanction of its own Bible, and persecuted and excommunicated those who were in favor of freedom. The attitude of the American church in regard to slavery has branded it with eternal shame. If freedom had been left to the tender mercies of the church it would have perished amid the clanking chains of millions. It was the Infidel who kindled the fires of opposition; who stirred the people and made them see the wrong; and it is true, beyond question, that Infidelity has been the salvation of American Liberty.”

To learn more about the heretical abolitionists and other courageous Infidels, visit our website <http://belovedinfidels.com/>.

—RODERICK BRADFORD



RODERICK BRADFORD AT THE D.M. BENNETT MONUMENT IN GREEN-WOOD CEMETERY, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK, 2006

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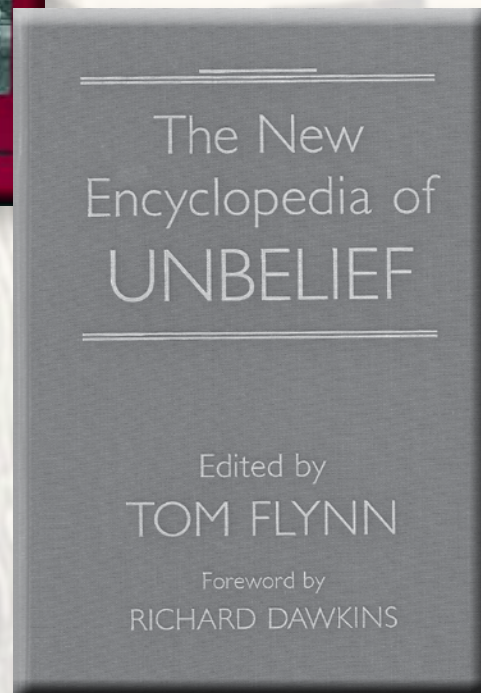
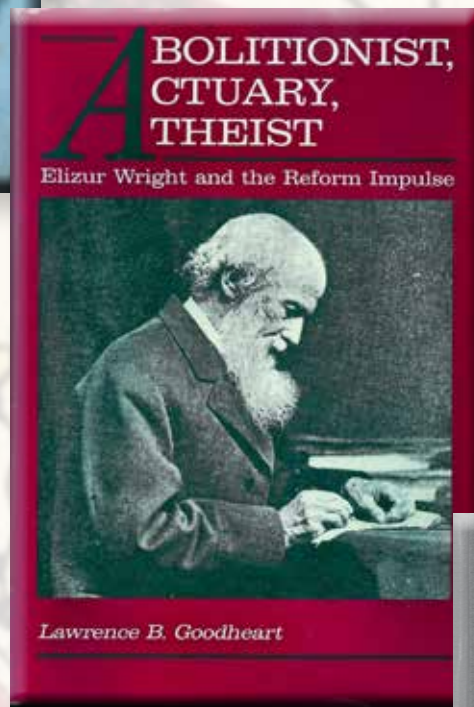
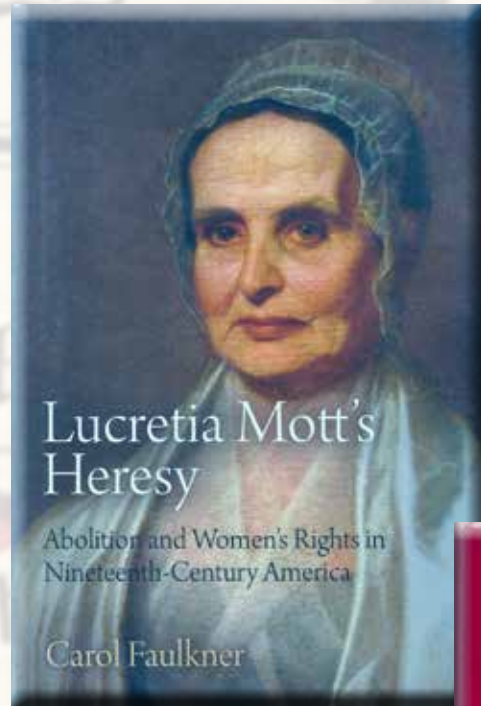
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THE HERETICAL ABOLITIONISTS

Despite all the enlightening scientific developments of the mid-19th century, the narrow-minded Christian conservative crusade continued. And religious publishers persevered. In New York City, the evangelical American Tract Society flourished. In 1861, the first year of the Civil War, 370,000 more Bibles were printed than the previous year. Over the course of the war, more than 5 million Bibles were published.

EXCERPT FROM
THE AMERICAN FREETHOUGHT FILM SERIES
WRITTEN BY RODERICK BRADFORD
WITH COMMENTARY BY
CAROL FAULKNER, TOM FLYNN, AND
LAWRENCE B. GOODHEART

TOM FLYNN: The American Tract Society would employ what they called colporteurs. These were guys who would ride around the country, particularly in the areas out west, on horseback. And they would sell and give away Bibles, sell little religious tracts, and they blanketed the country.

In 1850, THE AMERICAN TRACT SOCIETY employed 569 traveling distributors. By boat, rail, and often on horseback, Tract Society colporteurs visited 505,422 families across the country; gave away 35 million pages of books and tracts; and sold nearly half million volumes nationwide in that year alone. Christian organizations were responsible for distributing an immense quantity of religious material, yet they did not succeed in bringing about the millennial reign of Jesus Christ as they hoped and prayed. Nor, despite their industry, did they reach everyone. They came close, however, in the process producing the young nation's first mass medium. But trouble loomed on the horizon. In 1853, William Jay, one of the wealthy founders of the Bible and tract movement in America,

discontinued funding the American Tract Society because of its inaction on slavery. In an open letter to the Society, William Jay expressed his "painful doubts":

There is a giant, and in its influence an all-pervading sin in our land. Yet the American Tract Society has publicly and officially announced through you, as its organ, that it does not intend to recognize even the existence of this sin!

And while the Bible societies thrived, little if any, freethought activity occurred during the Civil War. Freethinking abolitionists, however, were convinced that the churches played a central role in justifying slavery. Leading abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison called that unholy alliance between slavery and the churches "the sum of all villainies." Samuel Porter Putnam, a Civil War commander, condemned the church and praised his fellow freethinkers:

It supported it, defended it, gave it the sanction of its

own Bible, and persecuted and excommunicated those who were in favor of freedom. The attitude of the American church in regard to slavery has branded it with eternal shame. If freedom had been left to the tender mercies of the church it would have perished amid the clanking chains of millions. It was the Infidel who kindled the fires of opposition; who stirred the people and made them see the wrong; and it is true, beyond question, that Infidelity has been the salvation of American Liberty.

In the 19th century—before and during the Civil War—the most influential abolitionist publication was *The Liberator*. Founded by social reformer William Lloyd Garrison in 1831, the Boston weekly anti-slavery newspaper ran until 1865 with a circulation of about 3,000. And while the majority of the subscribers were African Americans, about a quarter of the readers were white abolitionists who shared William Lloyd Garrison’s advocacy for “immediate and complete emancipation of all slaves” in the United States.

Two “immediatists” (as they were known) were Lucretia Mott and Elizur Wright. Lucretia Mott (1793-1880) was a Quaker women’s rights activist and Elizur Wright (1804-1885), was a devout Christian and former colporteur. Although groomed by his parents for the ministry, Elizur Wright accepted a professorship of mathematics and natural philosophy at Western Reserve College in Hudson, Ohio. During this time Wright, along with a few of his

We often bind ourselves by authorities rather than by the truth.

—Lucretia Mott

Below
ELIZUR WRIGHT, 1841;
LUCRETIA MOTT, 1842

colleagues, started receiving copies of *The Liberator* from Boston.

LAWRENCE B. GOODHEART: The reason this is such an important transition, not only in Wright’s life but in American history and particularly protest history, is that Garrison influenced by African Americans in Boston who were opposed to slavery very early particularly David Walker in his appeal to the colored citizens of the United States that denounces slavery in vehement terms. And Garrison a very vehement and vociferous, powerful truth seeker made this point, made this analogy. He said if the churches can denounce adultery. And from his point of view rightly so. And say that adultery must stop immediately cause it is sin. Then what about the greatest sin of all? Another person owning another human being. If adultery should be stopped immediately. All the more so slavery should be stopped immediately. But of course the churches, Presbyterian, Congregational, Episcopalian, and even at that time in the early 1830s, a small population of Roman Catholics. None of the established churches except for a few fringe Quaker groups took a stand against slavery.

IN PHILADELPHIA, LUCRETIA MOTT, an outspoken Quaker abolitionist, also found fault with the church’s role in slavery.

CAROL FAULKNER: Lucretia Mott was not dissimilar from Thomas Paine (raised by a Quaker father), both were anti-clerical, both viewed organized religion as profoundly problematic, and both were



interested in individual liberty. Lucretia Mott was a heretic in that she held very controversial unorthodox beliefs that brought her into conflict with her co-religionists in the society of friends.

FAULKNER: Mott saw American churches as one of the bulwarks of slavery. In other words they didn’t condemn it. She believed that no religion was taking an adequate stand against slavery. Lucretia Mott was an immediate abolitionist. She believed that slavery should be ended without question, without compensation, not gradually—immediately. And this made her one of a radical minority in American society in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s. Churches would not host anti-slavery speakers, they shut their doors to anti-slavery speakers. And abolitionists at one point have to build their own hall, Pennsylvania Hall which is opened in 1838 in Philadelphia and immediately in its first week of opening is burned to the ground by a mob of 15,000 strong. So the abolitionists see the church as and obstacle to ending slavery. They seen them as unwilling to condemn the institution, unwilling to excommunicate slave holders or even tell them that what they are doing is sinning.

AT WESTERN RESERVE, ELIZUR WRIGHT and his colleagues, convinced by the passionate arguments of William Lloyd Garrison, transformed the college into a center for radical abolitionism and demanded immediate emancipation and equal rights for blacks. Like many other 19th-century immediatist abolitionists, Wright was taught the ethic of doing the right thing. But after learning from William Lloyd Garrison that his Christian religion ignored and/or even supported slavery, he turned against the church because of its hypocrisy.

Above
PENNSYLVANIA
HALL BURNING, 1838;
LUCRETIA MOTT
AND PHILADELPHIA
QUAKERS



GOODHEART: These young people in their twenties and thirties reared in the church and taught to do the right thing, revered in the teachings of what we might call the social gospels, find out that the organized churches would not take a stand against slavery, but actually denounced the abolitionists, the radical abolitionists which led many of them like Wright to break with the church and to denounce the church as hypocritical. And that is the central aspect of what Garrison did for many abolitionists.

IN 1833, ELIZUR WRIGHT accepted the position of secretary of domestic correspondence of the American Anti-Slavery Society in New York City which placed him in the vanguard of the movement. Wright exhibited organizational and literary talents, aided fugitive slaves, and argued passionately for racial justice.

Wright’s annual reports to the national anti-slavery society included a litany of crimes against abolitionists; whipping, imprisonment, Garrison being mobbed in Boston and the murder of Illinois anti-slavery printer Elijah Lovejoy.

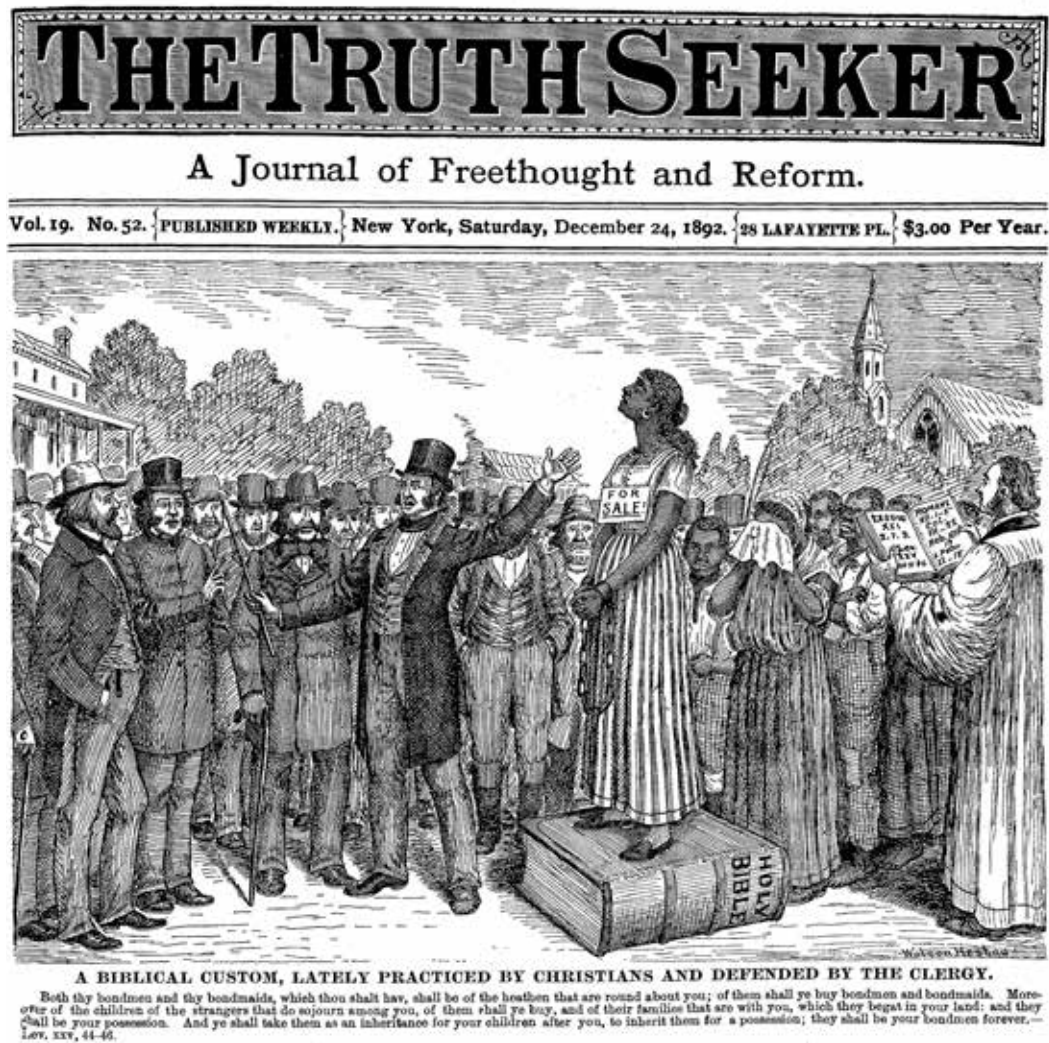
FAULKNER: Elijah Lovejoy’s press was repeatedly attacked by mobs. And finally I think it was the third or fourth attack on his printing press that the mob killed him. And he was a very important figure for the anti-slavery movement ever after because he represented the censoring tendencies of pro-slavery forces, their willingness to shut down free speech and shut down any opinion that they didn’t agree with.

GEORGIA GOVERNOR WILSON LUMPKIN responded to Yankee anti-slavery activity by offering a five-thousand dollar bounty for the delivery of ten leading abolitionists. Among the wanted was Elizur Wright.

It is slavery, and not the constitution which governs the United States at the present time.

—Elizur Wright





Elizur Wright soldiered on and by 1840, factionalism among abolitionists propelled Wright into the forefront of political action in Boston where he edited abolitionist newspapers. The backlash against abolitionism provoked Wright to denounce Christian hypocrisy and attack prominent clergymen in print, including his one-time idol Lyman Beecher:

Our revered Doctors of Divinity in one breath preach from the Bible, that it's "a mortal sin to steal a pin" and, in the next, appeal to the same Bible to show that stealing a man or woman is no sin at all!

GOODHEART: In Wright's case he took a stand against slavery at a time in which this vocal group of principled people were attacked in some cases killed, imprisoned, intimidated. And then a little bit later on in his life as the 19th century wore on, this is where the rational aspect cut in and he found Christian doctrine just fantastic and unbelievable.

FAULKNER: "Come-outerism" was the practice among abolitionist of leaving churches that did not condemn slavery. So abolitionists would go to

Above
TRUTH SEEKER
FRONT PAGE, 1892

My conviction led me to adhere to the sufficiency of the light within us, resting on truth for authority, not on authority for truth.

—Lucretia Mott

their ministers, they would try to make anti-slavery announcements from either the pews or the pulpit and when they were rejected they would protest and they would leave the church complaining that the church did not sufficiently condemn slavery as a sin. So many abolitionists came out of their churches, especially in the 1840s.

While some abolitionists like Elizur Wright left their churches in protest, Lucretia Mott decided not to come out, but to stay in, and challenge her fellow Quakers on the issue of slavery.

FAULKNER: Lucretia Mott decided that it would be more effective if she remained in the society of friends and agitated as a member of the organization. She called it "standing out in heresy." She had to be willing to take the criticism, the accusations from her fellow Quakers in order to change the organization.

Like her fellow Quakers, Mott believed in the light within and principled heresy. And in much the same way that Thomas Paine had inspired freethinkers to unite, Lucretia Mott would become instrumental in launching the women's rights movement.

FAULKNER: In 1840 Lucretia Mott went to the World's Anti-Slavery Convention. She was an official delegate representing the American Anti-Slavery Society and the Philadelphia female Anti-Slavery Society among other organizations. When she arrived at the convention, the London committee that organized the convention did not allow her or the other official American female delegates to participate in the convention. They could sit and observe but they were not official delegates.

As a protest to the organizers' decision to exclude female delegates, abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison sat with the women.

FAULKNER: One of the commemorations of the convention was a painting by Robert Haydon the artist. So she and her husband both sat for Robert Haydon in his studio. And before they left London they returned to his studio to see the painting and she discovered of course that she was not prominently featured in it despite having sat for the artist. James Mott is clearly visible in the foreground. Lucretia Mott is a blurry image in the background. And Robert Haydon in his diary recorded that he had determined he was not going to include Lucretia Mott because he was saving a prominent spot for a beautiful believer in the divinity of Christ and he

Lucretia Mott leads the American women, has infidel notions, so I do not give her the prominence I intended: that goes to a devout believer.

—Benjamin Robert Haydon

Below:
THE ANTI-SLAVERY
SOCIETY CONVENTION,
1840, BY BENJAMIN
ROBERT HAYDON

had determined that Lucretia Mott was not such a believer. Her views were too scandalous.

At the convention, Lucretia Mott met Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the young wife of abolitionist Henry Brewster Stanton. After the London committee voted to exclude female delegates, the two women agreed that when they returned to America, they would organize a woman's rights convention.

FAULKNER: Elizabeth Cady Stanton viewed the Bible as not the word of God as a historical document and thus not particularly useful for making rules about women's behavior or women's rights. And she viewed the Bible as for the most part being used to harm women and keep women down rather than lift them up.

Numerous individuals who worked to end slavery joined the woman's movement. In 1848, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were the two main organizers of the first women's rights assembly held in Seneca Falls, New York. Along with Mott and others, Stanton wrote the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments. Modeled after the Declaration of Independence, the controversial document denounced discrimination against women and religious injustice. During a period when women were forbidden



to give speeches in public, Stanton condemned the clergy, a theme she would continue to express the rest of her life.

Stanton’s anti-clerical remarks, as well as the convention itself, evoked the wrath of clergymen and the press. Clerics and conservative newspapers denounced the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments as “atheistic.” James Gordon Bennett, publisher of *The New York Herald*—the most popular newspaper in America—characterized the women’s rights assembly as a combination of “socialism, abolitionism, and infidelity.”

FAULKNER: I think he once called Lucretia Mott basically a grizzled Caesar. He commented on her appearance and her status in the movement. She was a lot older than a lot of other women’s rights activists. But he regularly accused abolitionists and women’s rights activists of insanity, infidelity, breaking with accepted religious traditions and socialism. Any epithet that he could throw at them he would throw at them.

THE SENECA FALLS CONVENTION was one of three major public events in the span of just six years that Christian critics perceived as threatening organized religion. The very first occurred a few months earlier in Boston and was also attended by Garrisonian abolitionists.

FAULKNER: The Anti-Sabbath convention was held in March 1848 and it was a meeting organized to protest efforts to enshrine into law the Sabbath as a holy day of observance.

The Bible and the Church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of women’s emancipation.

—Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Below
ELIZABETH CADY STANTON,
WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON,
ERNESTINE ROSE

AMERICA’S WELL-ORGANIZED and influential Protestant fanatics weren’t satisfied with the puritanical limits already in place. They also wanted to cancel mail service on Sunday and a halt shipping and public transportation.

FAULKNER: Lucretia Mott was particularly critical of Sabbatarian efforts because she viewed them as superstitious and she also viewed them as a violation of individual liberties and an individual’s right to pursue one’s own conscience and personal beliefs. She was much more interested in people observing everyday as a holy day and doing good and living a religious life everyday rather than it be mandated on a specific day.

THE THIRD EVENT CRITICAL OF RELIGION—the Hartford Bible Convention—was held a few years later in 1854.

FAULKNER: It was in a tradition of speaking out about religion and attempts to use religion to force people to conform to a particular world view and to legislate basically morality and religious belief in American society.

THE FOUR-DAY CONNECTICUT MEETING was called to order by the leading proponent of spiritualism in America, Andrew Jackson Davis. In the 19th century, spiritualism was the belief that it was possible to communicate with the dead. During the Golden Age of Freethought, spiritualists and unbelievers were united in their opposition to Christian orthodoxy.

FLYNN: The earliest spiritualists thought of themselves as scientists. They believed that through their séances, they were finding a new way to prove what the afterlife was really like. And it wasn’t like the Bible said it was. So that put them in a position of enmity relative to Christianity.

COMMUNICATING WITH SPIRITS acted as a surrogate religion for many fearful of the vast changes in 19th-century American life. Spiritualists had no need for dogma or ministers in their communications with the deceased and unseen spirits; their creed eliminated the middleman, the clergy.

FLYNN: There was a very interesting relationship between the freethinkers and the spiritualists. A lot of people saw them as being in one big camp. And certainly what they had in common was that they both dared to question Christian orthodoxy and the traditional Christian view of heaven and hell. And there was a lot of interchange between the movements. A camaraderie existed among unbelievers and spiritualists. Several prominent figures in the freethought movement, including Matilda Joslyn Gage and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, were spiritualists.

[In the 1870s, a quarter of the *Truth Seeker* readers were spiritualists. And the majority of the country’s spiritualists supported D.M. Bennett’s fight for freedom of expression. The founder of the *Truth Seeker* did not consider spiritualism and atheism incompatible. His articles about his spiritualistic activity, however, incurred criticism in the form of letters to the editor.]

My sisters, the Bible has enslaved you; the churches have been built on your subjugated necks. Do you wish to be free? Then you must trample the Bible, the church, and the priests under your feet.

—Ernestine Rose

Below
ELIZUR WRIGHT;
SIGNING THE DECLARATION OF THEIR INDEPENDENCE,
PUCK MAGAZINE, 1911

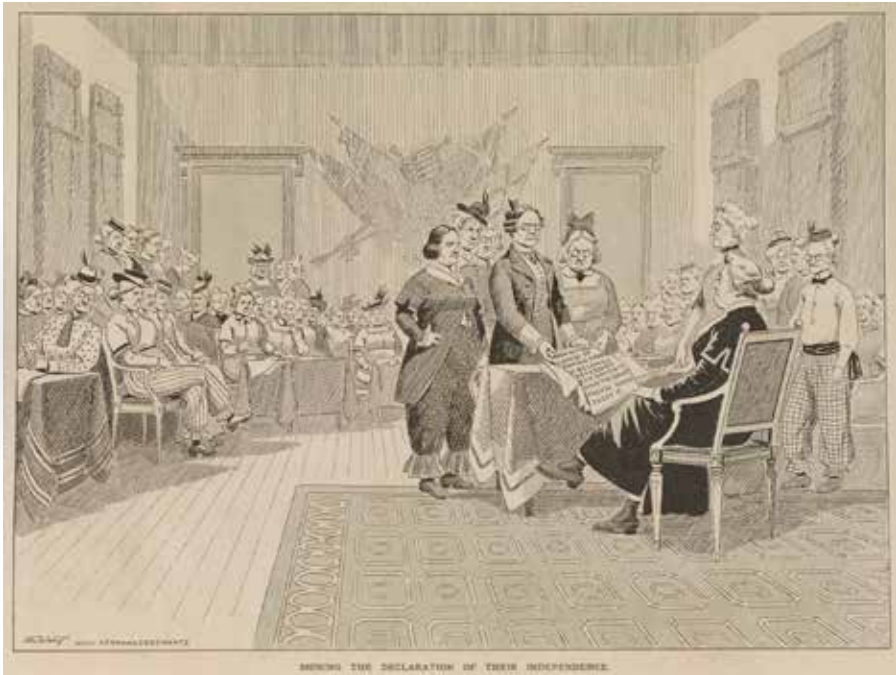
FAULKNER: Lucretia Mott was skeptical of spiritualism. She certainly had friends and allies who participated in séances. Her husband James Mott, also an abolitionist, participated in a séance. But she was above all a rationalist. She believed in argumentation. She believed that Americans and all human beings should move away from superstition and towards science.

THE HARTFORD BIBLE CONVENTION was attended by a diverse group of prominent reformers including abolitionists Parker Pillsbury, William Lloyd Garrison, and Ernestine Rose, a firebrand atheist.

FAULKNER: Rose’s speeches were protested far more than other participants. Not only because she was a self-proclaimed atheist but because she was a woman. So that the idea that a woman would speak publicly and say that the Bible is simply a historical document. It might have some useful observations of us on how we should live but it shouldn’t be used to make a law was just scandalous to people.

ERNESTINE ROSE’S SPEECH caused pandemonium and created a huge sensation throughout conservative orthodox New England.

FAULKNER: Ernestine Rose did cause some controversy because of her professed atheism. Some people in the women’s rights movement especially felt uncomfortable with that. In the anti-slavery movement as well probably many anti-slavery conventions there would be a debate over whether to start this meeting with a prayer. And Lucretia Mott to her credit would always say no, we should not start this



meeting with a prayer. We should not start it with a hymn because it would be imposing a particular world view on others who do not accept it.

IN THEIR OPPOSITION TO SLAVERY, the reformers at Hartford united in their distrust of religious institutions. In his speech at Hartford, Parker Pillsbury—who would later publish *The Revolution* with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton—stated their resolution to condemn any Bible, religion, church or ministry that defended or apologized for slavery, war, or oppressive government. Pillsbury’s speech expressed the strong abolitionist sentiment occurring at the time both outside and inside of churches.

In the turbulent decades ahead, both Lucretia Mott and Elizur Wright would be in the forefront of other reform movements. Lucretia Mott played a prominent role in the struggle for women’s rights and is memorialized in marble with her fellow suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the rotunda of our nation’s capital.

Elizur Wright was an accomplished ecologist before the word was coined. Wright, however, has not been memorialized in granite. Nevertheless, Wright fought for free speech and became one of the nation’s most remarkable reformers and a revered leader in

If our principles are right, why should we be cowards?

—Lucretia Mott

Below
ELIZABETH CADY STANTON, SUSAN B. ANTHONY, LUCRETIA MOTT. THE MONUMENT, BY ARTIST ADELAIDE JOHNSON, WAS PRESENTED TO THE U.S. CAPITOL AS A GIFT FROM THE WOMEN OF THE UNITED STATES BY THE NATIONAL WOMAN’S PARTY ON FEBRUARY 10, 1921.

the American Freethought movement.

Wright had a founding role as the Massachusetts State Commissioner of Life Insurance in which he sought to make life insurance secure, as he declared, for the “widow and orphan” from the machinations of the financial organizations. Wright has been called the “Father of Life Insurance” and in Robert Ingersoll’s opinion:

One of the Titans who attacked the monster, the gods of his time, one of the few whose confidence in liberty was never shaken, and who, with undimmed eyes, saw the atrocities and barbarisms of his day, and the glories of the future...when we received our morals from merchants, and made merchandise of our morals, Elizur Wright held principle above profit, and preserved his manhood at the peril of his life.

Moreover, according to *Truth Seeker* editor George Macdonald, Elizur Wright’s abolitionist work “was conspicuously heroic and the black race of America owes to but few men more than to him.” Among his fellow freethinkers, Elizur Wright was affectionately known as the “Nestor of Liberalism” which in Greek legend means the oldest and wisest man of a community.

A Tangled Tale of Angels, Anarchists, and Atheists



Ida C. Craddock
1857-1902



Voltairine de Cleyre
1866-1912

by Robert P. Helms

IDA C. CRADDOCK is one of countless radical figures whose lives are understood only partially by each interested party. Ida’s life, however, is so compelling that scholars and researchers have never lost sight of that martyr of freethought. This article will focus on my own discoveries of details of her life, and on her interactions with Voltairine de Cleyre, Philadelphia’s celebrated anarchist and atheist. I will also share important details of de Cleyre’s life that I have uncovered over the years.

I write this at a time when Ida Caddock is just beginning to be appreciated for the walking wonder she was during life. Starting with Theodore Schroeder—who collected a huge trove of Ida’s papers and other documentation toward a biography he never produced—through scattered articles over the decades, to the excellent volume *Heaven’s Bride* by Leigh Eric Schmidt (2010), this fascinating freethinker has caught the attention of many writers. However, each new researcher has fed the next. After knowing quite a lot about Ida for 15 years, I read Schmidt’s book—and was startled to find a photograph of her grave. Early the next morning I walked one mile to Woodlands Cemetery and discovered something *everyone else* had missed: Ida’s middle name, which was Celanire. The family obelisk seems to be the only surviving document of this fact.

This discovery of Ida’s middle name did not seem important. A search of 19th Century literature determined that this Medieval French name almost never occurs—but “Celanire” is the author of eleven short sketches between March and July of 1879, the first in Potter’s *American Monthly* and the rest in *Saturday Evening Post*. This is the only writer using the name in the English language during the 19th Century, and both journals’ offices were closer to the 21-year old Ida’s home than my

home is to her grave. I am pleased to share this connection as a certainty.

Ida Celanire Craddock was born in Philadelphia on August 1, 1857, the only surviving child of Elizabeth “Lizzie” S. Craddock (later Decker), who remained the dominant force throughout her brilliant daughter’s life. Ida’s father was Joseph T. Craddock, widowed in 1852 with four children between ages nine and seventeen.

Lizzie entered the Craddock family around March, 1855 and gave birth to the first Ida Craddock at the end of that year. This Ida lived just seven months and was buried beside Joseph’s first wife, with no middle initial on the record. Lizzie’s second daughter, Ida C. Craddock, arrived thirteen months after her sister’s death. The first Ida re-emerges in the story later because she seems to become “Nana” the spirit sibling.

Ida’s father died when she, his youngest child, was six months old. Three years later and just prior to the Civil War, Ida lived with her mother, her 20-year old stepsister Rebecca Craddock, and one servant. Rebecca married in 1864, so we can presume that Ida had an adult stepsister in her daily life until she was seven years old; however, Rebecca Craddock’s existence has been missed till now, along with much else regarding the early life of Ida Craddock.

It has been repeated that both Ida’s parents were Quakers, but it was at a time when that religion was at its lowest level of activity in hundreds of years. Neither Ida nor her mother was recorded as a Quaker, and except in the fact that Ida attended the Friends Central School between ages sixteen to nineteen, and was involved in other Quaker-based activities (not scarce in Philadelphia) as the years passed. In one letter Ida mentions



her “French blood” (1889), and indeed Lizzie gave France as both her parents’ birthplace in the 1880 census. If this was a Quaker family, the Religious Society of Friends did not record it as such.

Lizzie S. Decker was a woman of very strong personality who remained in control of her household and increased her fortune throughout her life—but who also sold snake oil for over forty years and may have created a new identity for herself as an intelligent young woman. This was the mysterious Lizzie Decker who raised the wondrous Ida Craddock to possess such a powerful mind and fiercely independent spirit. Her best friend, Katie Stewart Wood, wrote after Ida’s death:

My acquaintance with Miss Ida C. Craddock began when she was about sixteen years of age... In appearance, she was very beautiful—a fine, clear complexion, with cameo-cut features and glorious, brilliant blue eyes. Her hands were remarkable for their delicate, tapering fingers. She stood and carried herself assertively, but had great charm of manner and was most fascinating in speech. Miss Craddock was unfortunate in her choice of friends and came under the influence of a woman and her husband who used her gifts. Born in affluent surroundings and cultivation, with every advantage of education and friends... [she] had knowledge of the French, German, Italian, Latin and Greek languages. With the history and literature of the world, her mental capacity and memory were astounding. She was a victim of easy friends, and later, circumstances, and was finally sacrificed to the monsters of creation who kill what they cannot understand.

Indeed the young Ida was in love with the world around her. A letter to Katie in July 1877 describes Ida’s journey from Philadelphia to Bristol, on her way to Freehold, New Jersey for a vacation. In the letter, she mentioned that she was “studying, or attempting to study, phonography.” This passage could

...after a full discussion of the report it was, on motion of Bishop Stevens, resolved that the Board of Trustees deem it inexpedient at this time to admit any women to the Department of Arts.

not better describe the spirit and the goals with which Ida entered the struggles of her adult life, and the first struggle began a few years later. During the spring of 1882, Ida self-published a short textbook for learning phonetic shorthand. In the preface, she wrote: “This volume is the outgrowth of the author’s experience as a teacher of phonography at Girard College.” This means that in the space of five years, Ida went from no knowledge of shorthand to teaching it for pay and then to being a published expert in the field. In the back of the book are testimonials by authors and teachers of the subject, all strongly recommending Craddock’s new book as “clear and concise” and “the best book ever printed” for beginners.

In the Fall of 1882, when Ida was 25, the Faculty of

In appearance, she was very beautiful—a fine, clear complexion, with cameo-cut features and glorious, brilliant blue eyes.

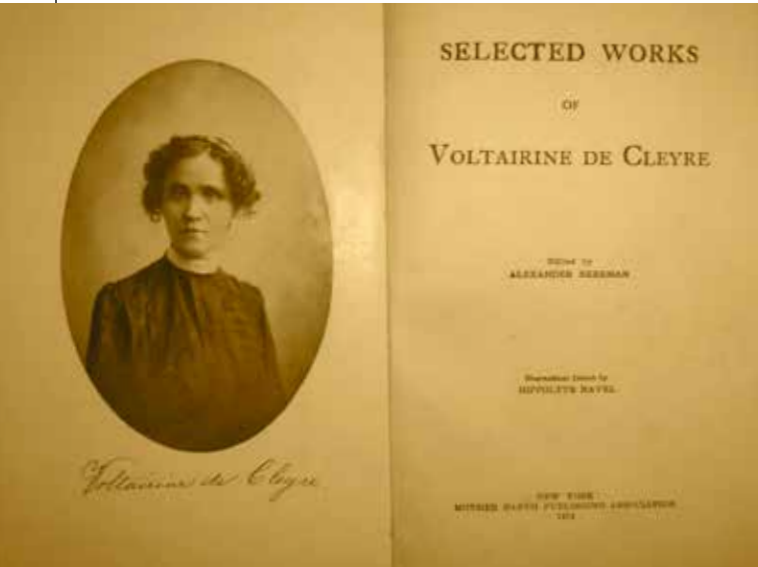
the Arts at the University of Pennsylvania reported to the Board of Trustees that “Miss Ida C. Craddock passed the entrance examinations very satisfactorily, and that they respectfully refer to the board her application for admission to the Freshman Class.”

For the next meeting, a subcommittee of the Board then drew up a plan for the creation of a “women’s section” of the College of Arts. Ida was offered practical assistance in proceeding with her studies while the plan was being implemented. Then, the minutes state, “after a full discussion of the report it was, on motion of Bishop Stevens, resolved that the Board of Trustees deem it inexpedient at this time to admit any women to the Department of Arts.”

At the same meeting, it was resolved “that the Trustees will organize a separate Collegiate Department for the complete education of women, so soon as funds are received sufficient to meet the expense thereof.”

Rt. Rev. William Bacon Stevens was Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania. Earlier in life, he had been a “professor of moral philosophy” and then the rector of a church in Philadelphia. All that was in October and November of 1882. From December through the following autumn, Ida sent letters to the Board of Trustees, requesting a formal reply to her application for admission, and then announcing her intent to present herself “for examination with the Sophomore Class.” She was never to attend classes at the University of Pennsylvania. According to one of the University’s websites, “More than fifty years passed before the College for Women matriculated its first students.”

An October 1889 letter to Katie from San Francisco shows that Ida had been on the west coast since summer and had acquired a respect and empathy for common workers because she now knew “how they have to daily face the prospect of starvation and misery.” In the same letter she implores Katie not to divulge to Ida’s mother any details of the letter, because



she would surely use the information to torment her. She’d been reading Edward Bellamy’s book *Looking Backward*, and is strongly recommending it to Katie as a solution to the world’s ills. Also, Ida envisioned her own *Salon* for local intelligentsia when she had gotten established again. She had become influenced by William T. Stead, the editor of *Borderland*. This was a publication devoted to the discussion of the border-realm between the ordinary, physical world and the world of spirits. Stead was also the editor of *Review of Reviews*.

She has been invited by Richard Westbrook to assist him in a “public matter” he was planning back in Philly, (founding the American Secular Union), and so looked forward to returning there. Richard Brodhead Westbrook was the son of a Pennsylvania politician. He became a lawyer, and also earned a Doctorate in Divinity. During his long life he went from being a Methodist minister to being a leading atheist scholar. By the time we find his name in Ida’s letters, Westbrook is 69 years old and has published several books, including three debunking the Bible, one on Girard College (which had defected from its secular charter) and others in favor of marriage, but critical of the church’s involvement in marriage and laws pertaining to it. His second wife, Henrietta Payne Westbrook, was a respected physician whom Voltairine de Cleyre described as “strong though quiet.” Henrietta sometimes lectured in the radical clubs on marriage and on public health issues. This couple is the same that was mentioned by Ida’s friend Katie, as the “unfortunate choice of friends” who used her gifts.

At the American Secular Union’s 14th Annual Congress at Portsmouth, Ohio (Oct. 31–Nov 2, 1890), Ida and the Westbrooks met two anarchists who would later share the radical club life with them in Philadelphia. These were the 24-year-old Voltairine de Cleyre, a scheduled speaker, and George Brown (1858-1915), an English shoemaker who had spent five years training Indian workers at an army boot factory in Cawnpore, and then migrated to Chicago in time to witness the Haymarket police riot in May 1886.

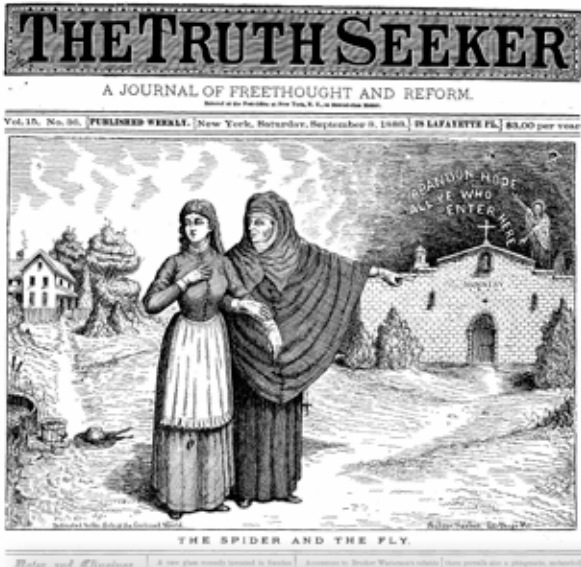


VOLTAIRINE DE CLEYRE was then a newcomer to the anarchist movement and just starting on the most intense and productive period of her life. A year earlier, she had moved from Grand Rapids, Michigan to Philadelphia where she bore her son Harry, conceived by accident, in June 1890, when she was 24. After a difficult childbirth, Voltairine left her baby with the father, Paineite lecturer James B. Elliott, and spent almost a year in Enterprise Kansas as a speaker for the Woman’s National Liberal Union. An excursion from Kansas now found her at the event in Ohio.

Voltairine was essentially an individualist anarchist, wishing for society the absence of physical compulsion of the non-aggressive, liberty enjoyed equally by every person, and the abolition of governments, standing armies, and any organizations that would enforce cooperative arrangements over personal freedoms.

De Cleyre’s father, August de Cleyre, was a freethinker who named his daughter in honor of Voltaire, the famous 18th century French author, philosopher, and critic of religious fanaticism. At the age of 12, however, her father enrolled his precocious child in a Roman Catholic convent where she grew to detest Catholicism and believed it converted students into “prostrate nonentities.” Soon after spending three years in the confinement of the convent school, Voltairine declared herself a freethinker. Because her family lacked better choices, she was educated in a Catholic convent school in Ontario for three of her teenage years and received excellent training. On the other hand, her opinion of Catholicism was that it turned bright young personalities into “prostrate nonentities,” and she declared herself a freethinker two years after graduating.

At Portsmouth, George Brown and de Cleyre were meeting for the first time. Their acquaintance became a friendship which lasted over twenty years and had a major effect on the lives of both. As George later recalled, Voltairine recited a poem “that would have been considered incendiary in any other than



Opposite page
FRONTISPICE FROM DE
CLEYRE’S SELECTED WORKS

Left
RICHARD BRODHEAD
WESTBROOK (1820–1899);
EDITORIAL CARTOON BY
WATSON HESTON

poetic form,” and she closed the conference with a speech on the moral standards of atheist men and women that was “mainly metaphysical,” and impressed her listeners greatly.

For about three years, from 1889 to 1892, Ida served as corresponding secretary of the American Secular Union, handling the group’s mail, helping to produce the *Truth Seeker*, hiring its paid speakers, arranging its conventions, and judging an essay contest alongside the eminent ethnologist Daniel G. Brinton, who was an anarchist for his last ten years of life. It was Ida who had engaged de Cleyre to speak in Portsmouth.

Responding to local news reports in August, 1893 of a young Danish woman’s rape by two men on Woodland Avenue, at the edge of the cemetery and very near to where her own grave would later be, Craddock wrote to the *Public Ledger* recommending the castration of rapists upon their release from prison. Public outrage was stoked because the victim spoke no English and was stranded in the dark night after taking the wrong trolley. “So long as capital punishment is recognized as a legitimate means of protection of the community from the murderer,” Ida wrote, “just so long ought castration be recognized as an equally legitimate means of protecting our women from the future criminal assaults of such men.” The two condemned rapists received 15 year sentences.

On a Tuesday evening in early 1894, Ida addressed the Ladies Liberal League of Philadelphia at its weekly meeting at Ridge Avenue and Green Street. The L.L.L. had been created two years earlier because the much older Friendship Liberal League, with its “tendency to smoothness and respectability” had been refusing to host lectures on Free Love, anarchism, and controversial women subjects. The new club welcomed male members, but only women could serve as its officers and most of its leading members were anarchists.

The Westbrooks were both in attendance. Richard Westbrook had lobbied to have Ida’s name struck from the speakers’ list, but de Cleyre had insisted she be heard. The evening’s topic was “Celestial Bridegrooms.” Ida believed that she was married to a spirit, and that she and the spirit-husband had sex on a regular basis. Voltairine later remarked that the “scholarly” Miss Craddock had “been denied a platform by every thin-shelled liberal society in the city, because she thinks that can happen now which every ex-Christian freethinker once devoutly believed did happen 1900 years ago! Observe how little they are really changed, since they are now as ready to persecute belief as once they were to persecute unbelief.”

Indeed, Ida gave dozens of examples of scripture and passages from the early “church fathers” to support what she had written in her pamphlet *Heavenly Bridegrooms*: “It has been my high privilege to have some practical experience as the earthly wife of an angel from the unseen world. In the interests of psychical research, I have tried to explore this pathway of com-

munication with the spiritual universe, and so far as lay in my power, to make a rough guidebook of the route.”

Ida wrote that summer to J.B. Elliott and de Cleyre from London, where she had fled from an attempt by her mother to have her committed to an asylum. At that time, mental institutions were easy for unusual, spirited women to be committed to, and often impossible to escape. Dr Henrietta Westbrook had given Ida shelter and helped her make the escape.

Ida had been in London at least four months under the name “Mrs. Irene S. Roberts.”—presenting herself as a married woman. She asked Elliott and de Cleyre, “By the way, would you mind telling me if you remember hearing a pistol click on the night that I delivered said discourse? Everybody was sitting as still as death, and I was beginning to speak of the Catholic Church, when I heard something that sounded wonderfully like

the cocking of a pistol. It flashed into my mind that perhaps the Catholic Church had sent an emissary there who was prepared to silence me.”

Ida assured them that this was not a “spirit sound,” but a “veritably physical, objective sound.” By the time of that lecture, Ida Craddock was already being watched by Anthony Comstock, the brutal agent of the U.S. Post Office, for having mailed an allegedly “obscene” tract on belly dancing. Soon she was stalked and hounded by her mother as well for being insane.

By the standards of most people (especially today), Ida was fairly delusional, but never in such a way that prevented her from earning her living; never a danger to anyone. She was a spiritualist, as were a great many very fine minds of her century. Her true offense to Victorian society was that her beliefs were non-Christian, and Ida was a woman intellectual.

As the century drew near to its end, Voltairine and Ida belonged to separate circles but probably read several of the same journals. Both these firebrands were entering the ugliest years of their lives as well. Ida would be jailed and confined to an asylum, then end her own life to spare herself more abuse and senseless violence. Between 1897 and 1905, Voltairine would have a very risky abortion, she would be shot and nearly killed by a mentally ill former pupil and comrade, and then the frail anarchist would have a near brush with death by syphilis, that then-unmentionable and incurable scourge.

De Cleyre was 30 years old when, during the late summer or fall of 1897, she wrote her lover a letter in London. The letter was never finished, nor was it signed, dated, or mailed. Yet the letter, clearly in her handwriting and style, now rests among the papers of Joseph J. Cohen, de Cleyre’s longtime associate in anarchism, which are stored in the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research archives in New York City. It is one of the most compelling and dramatic of all her known writings.



DEATH RATHER THAN SENTENCE.

Ida Craddock, Who Was to Appear in Court To-day, Committed Suicide With Gas.

Ida C. Craddock, who the police say was single, was found dead on her cot in a room on the fourth floor of the business building 134 West Twenty-third street, Manhattan, at 9:15 o'clock this morning. The woman was about 45 years old and an authoress. On the door leading to the room is the inscription, "Ida C. Craddock, Instructor in Divine Science." She had written several books on "The Sex Question," and recently had been arrested by Anthony Comstock, the superintendent of the Society for the Suppression of Vice. The dead woman was to have appeared in the United States Courts, in the Federal Building, to-day for sentence.



Above, from left NEWSPAPER CLIPPING, BROOKLYN EAGLE NEWSPAPER, OCTOBER 17, 1902; ANTHONY COMSTOCK. SHORTLY BEFORE COMMITTING SUICIDE, IDA CRADDOCK VISITED GEORGE MACDONALD AT THE TRUTH SEEKER OFFICE. THE EDITOR CONSIDERED CRADDOCK “EVERY INCH A MARTYR” AND DUBBED HER AND COMSTOCK—THE MAN WHO IMPRISONED D.M. BENNETT —“BEAUTY AND THE BEAST”; VOLTAIRINE DE CLEYRE IN PHILADELPHIA, 1901

Samuel H. Gordon (1871-1906) was a Russian Jew who had arrived in Philadelphia by 1890, found work as a cigar roller, and later attended the Medico-Chirurgical College, graduating as an MD in 1898. Gordon followed the anarchist-communism of Johann Most and was active during his six years of romance with Voltairine, but he was no deep thinker and was detested by many who knew him. In the letter she responds to his lurid accusations of infidelity with a supposedly drunken man, and reminds him of the dangerous procedure she’s had to endure while continuing her public lectures.

If you had lain on the Fall River steamer... as I did with a corset stay inside of that organ which you delight in theorizing about... wondering how you were going to get to the closet in time...if this had been your sequel of a pleasurable experience with me, as it was mine with you, you would be ashamed...

The letter illustrates not only the harrowing experience of the abortion, but it also shows how utterly devoted Voltairine was to her cause. She could have stayed in bed with friends on hand, but she was compelled to spread the idea, with her last breath if need be. De Cleyre gave a lecture two hours after the (induced) miscarriage in April 1897. Neither before nor after I spotted it around 18 years ago, no other writer has ever mentioned the part of that letter in which Voltairine describes her abortion.

In March 1902, now in New York City, when the authorities seized her pamphlet of marriage advice called *The Wedding Night*, Ida was convicted and sentenced to another three months on Blackwell’s Island. The purpose of this “obscene” text was to provide simple information on sex to newlyweds. There existed a widespread problem in those days, where a bride would not understand that she’d be expected to have intercourse with her new husband, on the night following the

wedding. Also, men would go into marriage not knowing that the woman would be traumatized by sex that they didn’t want, and so rape their wives after the wedding.

While incarcerated, it was reported that Ida was “brutally and forcibly vaccinated in the prison, as she objected to it and resisted.” Upon her release she was charged under a federal statute for mailing obscenity. By October she had been convicted and faced a sure five years in prison. This was not an acceptable option for Ida’s civilized heart and mind, so she chose suicide. On the 16th she did not go to court, but instead wrote two letters—one to her mother Lizzie, the other to the public.

To Lizzie, Ida wrote (in part), “The real Ida, your own daughter, loves you and waits for you to soon come over to join her in the beautiful, blessed world beyond the grave, where depraved Comstocks and corrupt judges and impure-minded people are not known... Please be sure, mother, not to let my body be buried until it has begun to gangrene. You know you promised me this long ago. I have a great horror of being put into a coffin alive. Don’t trust the say-so of any physician.”

In her long public letter, Ida spoke of Anthony Comstock, the man who crafted her destruction. “The man is a sex pervert; he is what physicians term a Sadist—namely a person in whom the impulses of cruelty arise concurrently with the stirring of sex emotion.”

Ida stayed in her room, opened a gas jet, opened the veins of her arm and died—perhaps to join her husband Soph (the name she gave to spirit husband) on the other side of her universe. Her funeral and burial were kept private and Ida’s notes were published. A month after Ida was gone, her mother wrote praising words of her daughter without acknowledging her own errors, or even showing that she had understood a single word spoken by her daughter in 45 years.

(Continued on page 50)

Islam and Women's Rights

BY VOULA PAPAS

Man enjoys the great advantage of having a god endorse the code he writes; and since man exercises a sovereign authority over women it is especially fortunate that this authority has been vested in him by the Supreme Being. For the Jews, Mohammedans, and Christians among others, man is master by divine right; the fear of God will therefore repress any impulse towards revolt in the downtrodden female.

—SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, *THE SECOND SEX*, 1949

Islam, Christianity and Judaism are patriarchal, monotheistic religions and are bound by one thing—their contempt of women!

When confronted with the issue of women's plight in Muslim countries, Muslim apologists insist that their religion has been misunderstood and that Islam actually grants women certain rights. They blame tradition and tribal societies for the low status and oppression of women.

Since Islam exerts absolute power over every aspect of Muslim society, from diet to relations between the sexes, why has it failed in fourteen centuries of its existence, to eradicate injustices against half of its adherents?



Turkey's women are the most liberated in the Muslim world. This was achieved not through Islamic reformation but through secularisation established by the founder of the modern Turkish republic Kemal Ataturk. Kemal was the product of secular education and had always admired Western culture. He pursued a program of westernisation that affected all aspects of Turkish life—women were granted the vote and veiling was prohibited. If the Turkish system were to collapse and replaced by an Islamic theocracy we can be certain that women's progress will be reversed and women will be at the mercy of the mullahs. In countries where there has been a raise in fundamentalism and reversal to strict religious law such as Pakistan, Sudan and Afghanistan women are targeted with vengeance and brutality.

Some Muslim scholars agree that Mohammed did proclaim some rights for Muslim women. For example he abolished the

pre-Islamic Arabian custom of burying alive unwanted female infants. He also decreed that women could own and inherit property, and that women have the right to enjoy sex! However, he did enshrine women's inequality and inferior status in immutable Quranic law accepted by Muslims as the infallible word of God.

"Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because men spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those among you who fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them." Sura 4:34

"...Women shall with justice have rights similar to those exercised against them, although men have a status above women. God is mighty and wise." Sura 2:228

Under Shari’a—Islamic law—a man can marry up to four wives. He can divorce his wife or wives by saying “I divorce you” three times. For a wife to obtain a divorce is usually very difficult. Muslim apologists claim that Muslim women have the right to divorce and that in Islam the mother is revered and respected. Upon divorce, fathers win custody of boys over the age of six and girls on the onset of puberty. Many women would be reluctant to divorce violent or polygynous husbands for fear of losing their children. Despite the exaltation of motherhood —Mohammed once told a follower that paradise is found at the feet of the mother—children are considered the property of the father with the mother being merely the caretaker. How is it possible for a Muslim man to respect his mother when immutable religious law proclaims women’s inferiority and inadequacy?

Under the Shari’a, compensation for the murder of a woman is half the amount of that of a man. A woman’s testimony in court is worth only half of a man’s. Women are entitled to only half the inheritance of males; the reason given for these is that males have families to provide for. In Sura 4:34 men are granted superiority and authority over women because they spend their wealth to maintain them, this implies that women are a burden on society and that their work in caring for children, household and livestock is insignificant and trivial.

Girls as young as nine can be married off by their father even if the mother disapproves of the marriage, often they end up as second or third wives of much older men – here is a way to instantly eradicate illegal paedophilia! Conservative clerics have resisted moves to raise the minimum age for girls. One of Mohammed’s wives, Aisha was seven when she was betrothed to Mohammed and nine when the marriage was consummated, Mohammed was in his fifties with several wives.

Any attempts by various governments to give women more freedoms, greater property and marriage rights have been vehemently opposed by conservative Islamists, who insist that the reforms are against Islam.

In the Qur’an the prescribed penalty for adultery is one hundred lashes and a year in exile—Sura 24:1. However, Mohammed did condemn people to be stoned to death, in one case the rabbis brought a man and a woman accused of adultery, Mohammed ordered the pair to be stoned to death. The Jews practiced stoning for adultery and it is mentioned in the Old Testament under Mosaic Law. Today many Islamic fundamentalists advocate the stoning of women and stoning does occur in many Muslim countries.

In Muslim countries, men have the power of life and death over their women. Honour-killers usually escape punishment and the ones that are tried and convicted, receive only a few months in prison where they are treated like heroes by other

inmates. Honour killings are carried out by men against women in their family for disobedience or suspected sexual transgressions. Even women who have been raped are killed for defiling the family honour.

In Jordan, the royal family has condemned honour killings but the government has not acted in repealing lenient laws for fear of enraging Islamic conservatives. The frighteningly powerful Islamic Action Front party, has declared that the proposal to introduce harsh laws against honour-killers “would destroy our Islamic, social and family values by stripping men of their humanity when they surprise their wives or female relatives committing adultery” (“family values” are certain to raise their ugly head whenever there is talk of justice for women!). Also they declared that honour killing is an Islamic duty and they justify their actions by the fact that Mohammed advocated stoning for adultery.

A 12-year old Jordanian girl returned home one evening from a walk with some friends. She was confronted by her enraged father who was shouting that she had dishonoured the entire family. He began beating his daughter with sticks and iron chains until she died. He told the police that he killed his only daughter because she went for a walk without his permission.

In Batsail, Bangladesh an 18-year old woman was flogged to death for “immoral” behaviour on the order of Muslim Clerics. A 16-year old Jordanian girl had her throat slit by her brother after having been raped by another of her brothers. An Egyptian father paraded his daughter’s severed head through the streets shouting: “I have avenged my honour.”

A woman that is not a virgin on her wedding night is likely to be killed by her male relatives.

Honour killings also occur among Arab Christians who claim that it is their tradition. Tradition has always been religion’s ally in the subjugation of women. Tradition and religion are the iron ball and chain that hinder women’s progress.

In countries governed by the Shari’a a woman’s testimony is worth only half of that of a man’s. In Pakistan since Islami-sation, rape victims are charged with “zina”—sex outside marriage—and are sent to prison.

In 1977 a Saudi princess and her lover were sentenced to death and executed. The princess was separated from her husband and intended to leave the country with her lover. The execution was captured on camera by a British tourist and was televised all over the world. In Saudi Arabia women are subject to many harsh restrictions. They are forbidden to drive and most jobs are denied to them. The only evidence of their existence is the appearance of their name on their father’s or husband’s ID card. While women are expected to abide by a medieval and self-effacing moral code, Saudi men are importing plane-loads

of prostitutes from overseas and are buying sex-slaves from impoverished countries in addition to being permitted up to four wives.

The law on adultery usually applies only to women. Since men are permitted up to four wives plus concubines they would hardly have the time for “unlawful” sex! Recently there was a case in Nigeria of a woman accused of sex outside marriage. She was sentenced to death by stoning while the man she had sex with was not charged because there was not enough evidence against him!

When Afghanistan was occupied by the Russians, women’s rights were protected by law—much to the dismay of Islamists. When the Russians withdrew, Islamic fundamentalists went to work in eradicating any gains made by women. The Taliban, a product of the Madrasah—fundamentalist religious school where boys spend hours every day reciting and memorizing the Qur’an—has taken the subjugation of women to new heights. Women were barred from employment and girls are forbidden to attend school. Women were also denied medical care because it was illegal for women to be examined by a male doctor. Any woman caught in the company of a male not related to her was sentenced to death and women were not permitted to leave the house without being accompanied by a male relative. Some women earned a small income by baking bread, when discovered by the Taliban they were burned alive in their own ovens.

In the Indian province of Kashmir, Muslim fundamentalists have demanded that all women (even those who are not Muslim) start wearing veils. When the call was ignored Muslim thugs threw acid in the faces of uncovered women.

Female genital mutilation is an African custom that predates Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is widely practiced in African countries, the Middle East, Malaysia, Indonesia and also amongst certain ethnic groups living in Europe, North America

and Australia. In Africa FGM is practiced not only by Muslims but also by some Christian and Animist groups as well.

Some Muslims believe that Islam mandates FGM and they continue its practice in order to ensure that their daughters will remain chaste until marriage. The doctrine of “chastity equals goodness” is nothing more than a device designed to control women’s sexuality and to reduce women into objects “new” and “used!” Sounds familiar? In the US, Christian fundamentalists have embarked on a “chastity and family values” crusade in order to curb women’s sexual freedom and autonomy.

Islam’s psychotic obsession with female chastity, modesty and virginity has rendered men incapable of viewing women as equal and worthy companions. How can we expect these men to treat women decently when their religion and culture forbids it! In fact, Muslim men can relax only when their foot is firmly placed on their women’s necks!

In Muslim societies religion governs all aspects of life and has priority over secular laws and local customs, therefore, the excuse that tradition alone is responsible for women’s oppression is untenable. Unless Muslim apologists are prepared to back their claims by a campaign to reform their religion and improve the situation of women, their assertions that Islam is blameless in oppressing women, are null and void.

There is a risk that multiculturalism and freedom of religion will ensure that tradition and religion remain eternally immutable. Should respecting other cultures mean that we should turn a blind eye to sadism, torture and brutality?

How long I wonder, will the world continue to tolerate the gender apartheid in the Islamic world and still persist in calling itself civilised?

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**ABOUT OUR PEN & SWORD/
STAR & CRESCENT SYMBOL**

The original pen and sword logo was designed for the D.M. Bennett monument erected in 1884 which is still standing in Brooklyn’s Green-Wood cemetery. Slithering around the sword of persecution (which represents Christianity and the Inquisition) is the serpent of superstition. The hilt of the sword is adorned with a cross and the ornamentation contains a popish tiara. The unique design

symbolizes the might of church power shattered by the forces of Freethought. Both are broken by the weapon of thought—the pen. Since our cause at the *Truth Seeker* is to prove religion is against reason—all religions—we have added the Islamic star and crescent. This new design symbolizes the power of religious fanaticism of the world’s two principal religions eradicated by the forces of Freethought.

FRANCES WRIGHT

“THE FEMALE THOMAS PAINE”

It has already been observed that women, wherever placed, however high or low in the scale of cultivation, hold the destinies of human kind. Men will ever rise or fall to the level of the other sex.

— FRANCES WRIGHT

BY GARY BERTON

FRANCES WRIGHT (1795-1852) HAS BEEN CALLED THE “FEMALE THOMAS PAINE.” IN MANY IMPORTANT WAYS SHE WAS, BUT IT DOES A DISSERVICE TO THE FIRST AMERICAN FEMINIST, ONE OF THE FIRST PHILOSOPHERS MAKING A PUBLIC CASE FOR FREETHOUGHT, A RADICAL ABOLITIONIST, LABOR CHAMPION, AND A POWERFUL PUBLIC ORATOR, TO BE SEEN IN TERMS OF SOMEONE ELSE’S ACHIEVEMENTS, even if that person is the incomparable Thomas Paine. Fanny Wright deserves her own standing as a seminal American hero, and her own place of honor in our American memory.

Born in Scotland in 1795 to radical parents who supported the French Revolution and disseminated *Rights of Man*, Wright was orphaned by three, and raised by a progressive aunt in England who schooled her in the ideas of the French materialists. By 18 Fanny had written her first book—a classic freethought treatise—*A Few Days in Athens*, but it would not be published until after her other notable book, *Views of Society and Manners in America* (1821). In 1818 Wright traveled to America to expand her world views and toured America for two years, meeting and exchanging views with many of America’s progressive minds. That experience became *Views of Society and Manners in America*, an analysis of American society and government, ahead of De Tocqueville in time and insight. The success of *Views* enabled her to get her first book printed, *A Few Days in Athens* (1822), which was written to support the works of Epicurus, who was the foundational stone to all Western freethought, and the consequent ideas of free government.

Views of Society and Manners in America opened many doors. She was introduced to Lafayette in Europe, who admired the book, and after a conversation with Frances, Lafayette admired her talent and world view as well. Lafayette accompanied her

on her second trip to America in 1824. They developed a Platonic yet close relationship that enabled her to meet Robert Owen and visit New Harmony, the first socialist experiment. Wright embraced the concept of socialism, and she also embraced the need to end slavery to save the political soul of America. As Lafayette returned to Europe, and after becoming an American citizen, Wright stayed and launched two projects that would define her for decades to come: with Owen she started the *Free Enquirer*, the first freethought newspaper in America, and she began a failed experiment to liberate the American slave population.

Equality is the soul of liberty; there is, in fact, no liberty without it.

—Frances Wright

The *Free Enquirer* not only set the standard for future freethought periodicals, but it served to unite the components of progressivism into one philosophical movement: women’s liberation (including the right to contraception and sexual freedom), abolition of slavery, labor liberation up to and including socialism, and free universal education. These were the tenets that Wright and Owen both embraced, and in many ways, these were the tenets which find their roots in the works of Thomas Paine. Although Paine did not specifically spell out these movements, his legacy led to the birth of these 19th century forces, as evidenced by the beginning of the annual celebration of Paine’s birthday held in the centers of these movements, a trend which Wright herself helped to create. Paine’s



Above THE FREE ENQUIRER HEADING, 1832

Below FRANCES WRIGHT’S HALL OF SCIENCE/FREE ENQUIRER OFFICE AND BROADWAY CENTRAL HOTEL ON FRONT PAGE OF THE TRUTH SEEKER, 1907. IN THE 1820s AND 1830s, FREETHOUGHT ACTIVISTS FRANCES WRIGHT AND OTHER “PAINEITES” — AS THEY WERE KNOWN— BEGAN HOSTING ANNUAL BIRTHDAY COMMEMORATIONS ON JANUARY 29TH IN NEW YORK CITY.





Left GILBERT DU MOTIER, MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE (1757-1834), CLOSE FRIEND AND SUPPORTER OF FRANCES WRIGHT. PORTRAIT BY JOSEPH-DÉSIRÉ COURT, 1791.



Right PORTRAIT OF FRANCES WRIGHT BY HENRY INMAN, 1824

influence on Wright can be seen also in her most famous quotation, which epitomizes Paine's philosophy: "Equality is the soul of liberty; there is, in fact, no liberty without it."

In 1825, Wright also started an experiment of a multi-racial community near Memphis, Tennessee, with land obtained partly through Lafayette, to educate freed slaves for their release into freedom. It was plagued with problems, a free-love atmosphere and mismanagement and personal relationship crises, all leading to its early demise. Wright wrote *A Plan for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in the United States Without Danger of Loss to the Citizens of the South* to justify her plan, but she had to pay for the transport of the slaves to freedom in Haiti three years after the start of the project.

Most notably, Frances Wright is renowned for being the first woman orator in America, at a time when women were not accepted as public speakers. Starting in 1829, then peaking from 1833-36, Wright toured the U.S. speaking on women's sexual

and educational liberation, on the abolition of slavery, on socialism and the evils of capitalism, and, tying it all together, on freethought and the absurdity of organized religion. She drew thousands to her speeches, and was subsequently the target of the holy alliance of the clergy and the press. The speeches were given in every major city in America, and "Fanny Wright societies" sprung up everywhere as centers for a growing social and political movement. Her movement was stifled by being far ahead of its time, but it did provide the activists and laid the intellectual groundwork for the latter half of the 19th century when these movements reached maturity.

—Frances Wright

Frances Wright married in 1838 and had one child at age 43, and soon divorced. She spent her remaining years in Ohio, releasing compilations of her lectures, but remained generally inactive except for her involvement with women's health issues. She died and was buried in Cincinnati in 1852. She was only 57.

Turn your churches into halls of science, and devote your leisure day to the study of your own bodies, the analysis of your own minds, and the examination of the fair material world which extends around you!

I Ran an Underground Abortion Referral Service

By Paul Krassner

When abortion was illegal, women had no choice but to seek out back-alley butchers for what should have been a medical procedure in a sterile environment. If there was a botched surgery and the victim went to a hospital, the police were called and they wouldn't allow the doctor to provide a painkiller until the patient gave them the information they sought.

In 1962, there was an article in *Look* magazine that stated, "There is no such thing as a 'good' abortionist. All of them are in business strictly for money." But in an issue of *The Realist*, I published an anonymous interview with Dr. Robert Spencer, a truly humane abortionist, promising that I would go to prison sooner than reveal his identity.

He had served as an Army doctor in World War I, then became a pathologist at a hospital in Ashland, Pennsylvania. He went down into the shafts after a mine accident, and aided miners to obtain Workmen's Compensation for lung disease. At a time when 5,000 women were killed each year by criminal abortionists who charged as much as \$1500, his reputation had spread by word-of-mouth, and he was known as "The Saint." Patients came to his clinic in Ashland from around the country.

I took the five-hour bus trip from New York to Ashland with my gigantic Webcor tape recorder. Dr. Spencer was the cheerful personification of an old-fashioned physician. He wore a red beret and used folksy expressions like "by golly." He had been performing abortions for 40 years. He started out charging \$5, and never more than \$100. He rarely used the word pregnant. Rather, he would say, "She was that way, and she came to me for help."

Ashland was a small town, and Dr. Spencer's work was not merely tolerated; the community depended on it—the hotel, the restaurant, the dress shop—all thrived on the extra business that came from his out-of-town patients. However, he built facilities at his clinic for African-American patients who weren't allowed to obtain overnight lodgings elsewhere. The walls of his office were decorated with those little wooden signs that tourists like to buy. A sign on the ceiling over his operating table said *Keep Calm*.

Here's an excerpt from our dialogue:

Q. Do you have any idea about how many actual abortions you're performed during all these years?

A. To be accurate, it's 27,006

Q. Have medical people come to you, who would otherwise shun you?

A. Oh, yes, I've had medical people who bring me their wives, and I've had quite a few medical people send me patients.

Q. But they wouldn't perform the operation themselves?

A. No, they'd never perform it, and just exactly what their attitude would be, I don't really know. Some of them, I presume, were absolutely against it, because I've had ministers, and they'd bring me their daughters or their nieces.

Q. Have police come to you for professional services?

A. Oh, yes, I've had police in here, too. I've helped them out. I've helped a hell of a lot police out. I've helped a lot of FBI men out. They would be here, and they had me a little bit scared—I didn't know whether they were just in to get me or not.

Q. What would you say is the most significant lesson you've learned in all your years as a practicing abortionist?

A. You've got to be careful. That's the most important thing. And you've got to be cocksure that everything's removed. And even the uterus speaks to you and tells you. I could be blind. You see, this is an operation no eye sees. You go by the sense of feel and touch. The voice of the uterus. But the only thing I can see is hypocrisy, hypocrisy. Everywhere I look is hypocrisy. Because the politicians—and I've had politicians in here—they still keep those laws in existence, but yet, if some friend of theirs is in trouble...

Even priests came to his clinic with the housekeepers they had impregnated. As if to retroactively approve of such hypocrisy, the Colorado Independent reported in 2013 that "A chain of Catholic hospitals has beaten a malpractice lawsuit by saying that fetuses are not equivalent to human lives." Their attorneys argued that in cases of wrongful death, the term "person" only applies to individuals born alive, and not those who die in utero.

After the issue of *The Realist* featuring that interview with Dr. Spencer was published, I began to get phone calls from scared female voices. They were all in desperate search of a safe abortionist. It was preposterous that they should have to seek out the editor of a satirical magazine, but their quest so far had been futile, and they simply didn't know where else to turn.

With Dr. Spencer's permission, I referred them to him. At

first there were only a few calls each week, then several every day. I had never intended to become an underground abortion referral service, but it wasn't going to stop just because in the next issue of *The Realist* I would publish an interview with somebody else.

A few years later, state police raided Dr. Spencer's clinic and arrested him. He remained out of jail only by the grace of political pressure from those he'd helped. He was finally forced to retire from his practice, but I continued mine, referring callers to other physicians that he had recommended. Occasionally I would be offered money by a patient, but I never accepted it. And whenever a doctor offered me a kickback, I refused, but I also insisted that he give a discount for the same amount to those patients referred by me.

Eventually, I was subpoenaed by district attorneys in two cities to appear before grand juries investigating criminal charges against abortionists. On both occasions I refused to testify, and each time the D.A. tried to frighten me into cooperating with the threat of arrest.

In Liberty, New York, my name had been extorted from a patient by threatening her with arrest. The D.A. told me that the doctor had confessed everything and they got it all on tape. He gave me until two o'clock that afternoon to change my mind about testifying, or else the police would come to take me away.

"I'd better call my lawyer," I told him.



I went outside to a public phone booth and called, not a lawyer, but the doctor.

"That never happened," he said.

I returned to the D.A.'s office and told him that my lawyer said to continue being uncooperative. Then I just sat there waiting for the cops.

"They're on their way," the D.A. kept warning me. But at two o'clock, he simply said, "Okay, you can go home now."

Bronx District Attorney (later Judge) Burton Roberts took a different approach. In September 1969, he told me that his staff had found an abortionist's financial records, which showed all the money that I had received, but he would grant me immunity from prosecution if I cooperated with the grand jury. He extended his hand as a gesture of trust.

"That's not true," I said, refusing to shake hands with him.

If I had ever accepted any money, I'd have no way of knowing that he was bluffing. The D.A. was angry, but he finally had to let me go.

Attorney Gerald Lefcourt (later president of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers) filed a suit on my behalf, challenging the constitutionality of the abortion law. He pointed out that the district attorney had no power to investigate the violation of an unconstitutional law, and therefore he could not force me to testify.

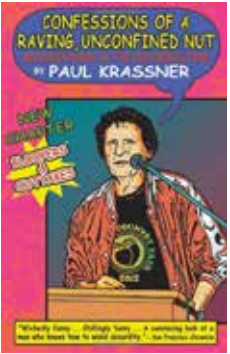
In 1970, I became the only plaintiff in the first lawsuit to declare the abortion laws unconstitutional in New York State. "Later, various women's groups joined the suit," Lefcourt recalls, "and ultimately the New York legislature repealed the criminal sanctions against abortion, prior to the Supreme Court decision in *Roe vs. Wade*."

Dr. Spencer never knew about that. He had died in 1969. The obituary in the *New York Times* acknowledged the existence of his abortion clinic. The obituary in the local paper in Ashland did not.

I continued to carry on my underground abortion referral service. Each time, though, I would flash on the notion that this was my own mother asking for help, and that she was pregnant with me. I would try to identify with the fetus that was going to be aborted even while I was serving as a conduit to the performance of that very abortion. Every day I would think about the possibility of never having existed, and I would only appreciate being alive all the more.

Pretending to be the fetus was just a way of focusing on my role as a referral service. I didn't want it to become so casual that I would grow unaware of the implications. By personalizing it, I had to accept my own responsibility for each fetus whose potential I was helping to disappear. That was about as mystical as I got. Maybe I was simply projecting my own ego.

In any case, by the time these women came to me for help, they had already searched their souls and made up their minds. This was not some abstract cause far away—these were real people in real distress—and I just couldn't say no. So I made a choice to abort myself every time. For nearly a decade, that became my fetal yoga. And, in the process, I had evolved from a satirist into an activist.



Excerpt from Paul Krassner's autobiography *CONFESSIONS OF A RAVING, UNCONFINED NUT: MISADVENTURES IN THE COUNTERCULTURE*. An expanded and updated edition is available at paulkrassner.com.



Left DEMONSTRATION PROTESTING ANTI-ABORTION CANDIDATE ELLEN MCCORMACK AT THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION, NEW YORK CITY 1976. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Right WOMAN REBEL MAGAZINE COVER

Opposite PAUL KRASSNER AND MARJORIE (AS SHE WENT BY), A WELL-KNOWN MERRY PRANKSTER IN PORTLAND, OREGON, AT KEN KESEY'S POETIC HOOR, 1976. PHOTO: CLYDE KELLER WWW.CLYDEKELLER.COM

Opening page TIMES SQUARE, NY, 1972

MARGARET SANGER (1879-1966) was a freethinking pioneer birth control activist from Corning, New York. Her parents greatly admired Robert G. Ingersoll, and Margaret opposed censorship and passionately believed in freedom of speech. In 1916, Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in Brooklyn, New York. Sanger popularized the phrase "birth control" and is considered the 20th century's most forceful and accomplished feminist. She founded the organization which evolved into the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Sanger edited a monthly magazine *The Woman Rebel* with the motto "No Gods, No Masters." Similar to *Truth Seeker* founder D.M. Bennett, Sanger (and her husband) promoted contraception and challenged the Comstock Act and was arrested numerous times for mailing "indecent articles" (birth control material) through the U.S. mails.





MATILDA JOSLYN GAGE

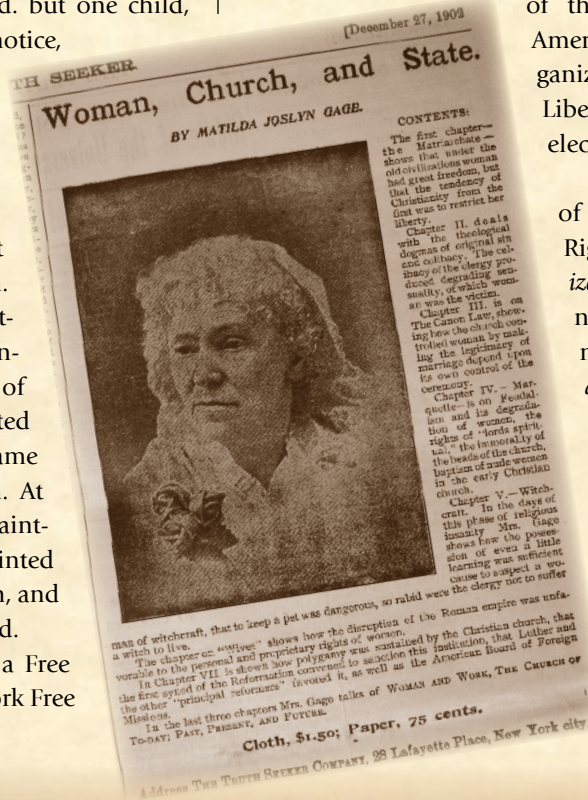
AUTHOR, SUFFRAGIST, AND FREETHINKER

(1826-1898)

MATILDA JOSLYN GAGE died on March 18, 1898 at the home of her son-in-law, L. Frank Baum—author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*—in Chicago, at the age of 72 years. In 1863 we opened a law office in the city of Syracuse, New York. On the floor above us was published a temperance paper edited by Dr. Hezekiah Joslyn. We soon made the doctor's acquaintance. He was an able, enthusiastic reformer, and we became intimate friends. He had, but one child, Matilda Joslyn Gage, the subject of this notice, and he was very proud of her. He read to us an able article written by his daughter that appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and shortly after introduced her to us. We found her a very bright, intelligent young woman, much interested in radical reforms, but not entirely emancipated from orthodox religion. Soon after this she, her father and the writer attended, as delegates, a radical Republican convention, held in Cleveland, Ohio, in the fall of 1864, at which John C. Fremont was nominated for President, but who, before the election came off, withdrew in favor of Abraham Lincoln. At that convention we became quite well acquainted with Mrs. Gage and have been well acquainted with her ever since. She was a growing woman, and soon became too large for any orthodox creed.

The first time that she ever spoke on a Free Thought platform was at the Watkins New York Free

Thought convention, in 1878, when, to our great surprise, she came to us, at that convention, and said she had an address she wanted to deliver that was very severe on orthodox Christianity. She said she expected that her attendance at that convention, and the speech she proposed to deliver, would virtually excommunicate her from the National Woman Rights party, of which she was a very active member, but she must be true to her honest convictions, which were that the Bible and the orthodox church were the two greatest obstacles in the way of woman's advancement. Her speech was in the same line as that taken by Mrs. Stanton in the pamphlet we recently published, entitled *Bible and Church Degrade Women*. Shortly after attending the Watkins convention she called a convention of the Free Thought Women of America, at Washington, and organized the "Woman's National Liberal Union," of which she was elected President.



Mrs. Gage was for a number of years the editor of a Woman's Rights journal, *The National Citizen*, and was the author of a number of books, the last, and most radical one, entitled *Woman, Church and State*, which has had a large circulation. She was associate editor with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton of the most important work that has ever been published relating to the woman movement, *The History of Woman Suffrage* in three large volumes.

MATILDA JOSLYN GAGE WAS ONE OF THE MOST INDEFATIGABLE WORKERS IN THE CAUSE OF HUMANITY THAT THIS COUNTRY HAS EVER PRODUCED, AND WE ARE GLAD TO PUBLISH BELOW TESTIMONIALS OF HER WORTH FROM TWO OF HER DISTINGUISHED FEMALE ACQUAINTANCES AND CO-WORKERS:



LUCY N. COLMAN

She was a woman of good intellect, and very superior attainments. I do not know any woman among those who have publicly worked for the cause of "woman's rights" who equaled Mrs. Gage in knowledge of the condition and position of woman in the past, as well as of the present; perhaps I should except Mrs. Stanton, but Mrs. Gage did not succeed in becoming a popular speaker—she will be regarded in the future much higher than now; as a writer the future will, I think, give her merited justice. Her late published work, *Woman, Church and State*, was rejected by the librarian of the "public library" in Fayetteville, but there are libraries all around the country easily reached, where the book is found; the refusal has only made the ignorance and bigotry apparent, and some time Fayetteville will be ashamed, not of the book but of the librarian who excluded it.



ELIZABETH CADY STANTON

In the death of Matilda Joslyn Gage the Woman's Suffrage Association has lost one of its most able speakers, writers and actual thinkers. Mrs. Gage was early trained to think and to express her opinions. Being an only child, her parents devoted all their leisure hours to her education. Her father, Dr. Hezekiah Joslyn, was a man of profound thought—well versed in the natural sciences, a skillful physician, and identified with the reforms of the day. Their home in Central New York was always a most pleasant resort for Liberal thinkers on religion, politics and social ethics. To their discussions the young daughter listened with keen satisfaction and thus early learned the difference between logical reasoning and mere dogmatism. Mrs. Gage's latest literary labors were given to *The Woman's Bible*. In the closing years of her life Mrs. Gage was much interested in the occult mysteries of Theosophy and other Eastern speculations as to reincarnation and the illimitable creative power of man.

Abridged obituary from *Free Thought Magazine*, Volume 16/Number 6 – June, 1898

The National Citizen

AND BALLOT BOX.

VOL. 3.] SELF-GOVERNMENT IS A NATURAL RIGHT AND THE BALLOT IS THE METHOD OF EXERCISING THAT RIGHT. [NO. 1.

MATILDA JOSLYN GAGE, SYRACUSE, N. Y., MAY, 1880. EDITOR AND PUBLISHER.

MASS MEETING

try's life, in every State and Territory woman has been counted in the basis of representation, to wield the power of one or the other of the parties in Congress and

MICHIGAN NATIONAL STATE CONVENTIONS.

The National Woman Suffrage Association.

The argument which I have thus based upon the very nature of man, and of humanity and God, is confirmed in every particular by the most impressively fortified

rule another. The parent has that right, and was to the parent who does not use it. There is a thought here—I have said enough to vindicate the ground, and that

The Trinity



In August 1878, the New York State Freethinkers' Association held their annual convention in Watkins Glen, New York.

The association, organized only a year earlier, already had over twenty-six hundred members—atheists, agnostics, abolitionists, dress reformers, free-love advocates, spiritualists, orthodox ministers, Free Religionists, and Shakers.

Their first convention was held under a fair tent near Wolcott, New York, the previous summer and was possibly the largest gathering of freethinkers ever assembled in the world. The organizers hoped to repeat the previous year's success at Watkins Glen, a small town on the southern shores of Seneca Lake.

The *Truth Seeker* promised that the Who's Who in American Freethought would be in attendance. A distinguished group of liberal luminaries were scheduled to speak: Frederick Douglass, the prominent abolitionist was slated to talk about the liberty of thought and expression. "He knows what the word liberty means," D.M. Bennett declared about the former slave. Veteran abolitionists Parker Pillsbury and Elizur Wright, president of the National Liberal League, along with leading suffragists Matilda Joslyn Gage and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, would be there. Horace Seaver and J.P. Mendum of the *Boston Investigator* newspaper were among the several free-thought publishers scheduled to attend the convention.

Excerpt from *D.M. Bennett: The Truth Seeker*
by Roderick Bradford. Prometheus Books, 2006

The United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, commonly called Shakers, were represented by Shaker elder Frederick Evans and George Lomas, editor of their periodical, *The Shaker*. “This is about the only Christian body that believes in liberty of thought and speech,” Bennett commented about the communalistic and celibate sect which he and Mary were former members.

A couple of weeks before the convention, the *Truth Seeker* reported a rumor that Robert Ingersoll would appear at the Watkins Glen meeting. “Col. Ingersoll can be sure of an immense audience,” the editor predicted but added: “The trouble will be that if it is announced in advance that he is to speak, the whole town will be thronged with an eager multitude, each of whom will desire to hear the most eloquent orator in America. The Colonel will be at home at this Convention.”

Robert Ingersoll—born only twenty-three miles north in Dresden—would indeed have felt at home in Watkins Glen. A few weeks earlier, however, the Ingersoll family departed for a European vacation and the Great Agnostic would not be among the speakers at Watkins Glen.

Two days before the convention, D.M. Bennett and his friends left New York City’s summer heat to take an evening train to the cool, remote village of Watkins Glen. The convention did not start until Thursday, but they planned to take in some of the area’s natural beauty. Accompanying the editor were Professor Albert Rawson and G.L. Henderson, president and treasurer, respectively, of the National Defense Association—forerunner of the American Civil Liberties Union—formed earlier that year on June 12, 1878. The National Defense Association’s



Above “THE TRINITY” CABINET CARD: D.M. BENNETT, JOSEPHINE TILTON, AND W.S. BELL—THE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY GHOST.

Opening pages WATKINS GLEN, NEW YORK; NATIONAL DEFENSE ASSOCIATION “WATCH DOG” LOGO WITH MOTTO (see pages 33 and 57)

first meetings were held in Science Hall, the same building where the *Truth Seeker* was published. The association’s mission was to investigate questionable obscenity cases, sympathize with the unjustly prosecuted, provide legal aid, and “to employ all peaceful and honorable means to roll back the wave of intolerance, bigotry, and ignorance which threatens to submerge our cherished liberties.” The anti-censorship National Defense Association’s motto was: “Eternal vigilance, the price of liberty.”

After a pleasant fourteen-hour train ride via Albany, Syracuse, and Geneva, the Bennett party finally arrived Wednesday morning at their destination in the scenic Finger Lakes. The following day the convention was called to order at 10 AM. Nearly a thousand people gathered in a large grove in the middle of the village for a full day of talks, lectures, and discussions on a wide range of subjects that raised a few eyebrows in the provincial village of thirty-five hundred orthodox inhabitants.

That morning, the audience heard from Shaker Elder Frederick Evans of Mt. Lebanon, dress reformer Mary Tillotson, and abolitionist and spiritualist Lucy N. Colman. Mary Tillotson—who wore her provocative reform pants—often attracted crowds and risked arrest in cities like New York, certainly received attention in the conservative village.

The Freethinkers’ Association chose the upstate New York village because of its location and natural beauty. Watkins Glen, however, was also one of the most backwater and bigoted burghs in the empire state. The residents of Watkins Glen did not know what they were in for prior to the opening session of the scheduled four-day event, but they had a good idea after the first meeting.

The National Defense Association’s first meetings were held in Science Hall, the same building where the *Truth Seeker* was published.

National Defense Association president Albert Leighton Rawson addressed the convention and opened with a critical analysis of Christian orthodoxy and followed with comments about Chaldean, Buddhist, Greek, and Zoroastrian traditions. Known as the Oriental Artist, Albert Rawson was an enigmatic figure who traveled extensively in the Middle East and chronicled his trips with drawings and paintings. He wrote and/or illustrated books on religious history, linguistics, Middle Eastern geography, biblical works, and books about Masonic and occult orders. Albert Rawson had extensive knowledge about the Islamic world and was deeply involved in Freemasonry, Theosophy, occultism, and secret societies. He spoke favorably about Gnosticism and mentioned Madame H.P. Blavatsky, a founder of the Theosophical Society. Rawson lamented the ascent of the Roman Catholic Church. Rawson’s speech included his Liberal and Positivist perspective and his prophecy of the upsurge of the new Church of Humanity–The Liberal Church.

The afternoon meeting featured a speech by *Shaker* magazine editor George Lomas, followed by a talk from Ella E. Gibson, author of *The Godly Women of the Bible, By an Ungodly Woman of the Nineteenth Century* published by The Truth Seeker Company. Freethought publishers Horace Seaver and J.P. Mendum arrived at the grove that evening, whereupon Seaver was induced by the audience to deliver a short speech which was well received. A vocal group accompanied by a melodeon entertained the enthusiastic crowd. “The day had been beautiful and everything passed off pleasantly,” Bennett noted.

The second day of the convention began with a spiritualist reading selections from the teachings of



Buddha and reciting the *Poems of the Beyond*. Shaker elder Frederick Evans passionately expressed his advocacy of taxation of church property and the need for maintaining church and state separation. (At the time the Shakers were the only American religious group whose property was taxed.) The afternoon session included presentations by a popular minister-turned Liberal lecturer, W.S. Bell.

An interesting feature of these conventions was the open invitation extended to Christian clergymen. Two sermons were included in Friday afternoon’s program but were immediately refuted by freethought lecturers. The evening meeting was held in the opera house, followed by a dance that lasted several hours.

Saturday morning began with a few hundred people taking a steamboat ride on tranquil Seneca Lake, while others listened to Lucy Colman and Mary Tillotson, who spoke on dress reform. Several booksellers and publishers—D.M. Bennett among them—set up tables in the grove to sell books.

The harmony of the convention became increasingly uncongenial during the debates between the freethinkers and the orthodox clergymen. “The convention had the fairness to allow their opponents, the orthodox clergy, to speak, two hours from their platform,” Bennett opined, “thus showing far more liberality than they are in habit of receiving from the same clergymen in their public meetings.” A Presbyterian minister addressed the audience, and in addition to the usual sermon, began disparaging Robert Ingersoll and condemning his agnosticism. While the Liberal audience politely listened to the clergyman for an hour, “the legal and ecclesiastical dignitaries of Watkins,” Bennett later learned, “were getting up a vile scheme to throw certain persons attending the convention into prison.”

By Saturday afternoon the mood of Watkins Glen on the platform and in the streets turned hostile. “As we walked their streets,” Bennett recounted, “we more than once heard uncomplimentary and uncalled-for remarks made about us as we passed. The Watkins people are excessively pious, and they hate Freethinkers with an intense hatred. Several of them made the *humane* remark that we ought all to be hung.”

One of the booksellers who set up a table that afternoon was Josephine S. Tilton, the sister-in-law of Ezra Heywood, the imprisoned author of *Cupid’s Yokes*. Heywood’s *Cupid’s Yokes* was the free-love advocate’s prosaic sociological treatise—without photographs or illustrations—that contained his views on love and the institution of marriage, which he called “legalized prostitution.” The pamphlet’s complete title is *Cupid’s Yokes: or, The Binding For-*

The Watkins people are excessively pious, and they hate Freethinkers with an intense hatred. Several of them made the humane remark that we ought all to be hung.

– D.M. Bennett

es of Conjugal Life; An Essay to Consider Some Moral and Physiological Phases of LOVE AND MARRIAGE, Wherein is Asserted the Natural Right and Necessity of SEXUAL SELF-GOVERNMENT. In the wordy booklet, the former abolitionist argues against conventional church-sponsored state statutes that regulate “personal liberty and rights of conscience in love.”

In *Cupid’s Yokes*, Heywood asks: “Why should priests and magistrates supervise the sexual organs of citizens any more than the brain and stomach?” He also provides an overview of the “National Gag-Law” [Comstock Law] and expresses his contempt for the “lascivious fanaticism of the Young Men’s Christian Association.” Heywood refers to Anthony Comstock, the U.S. postal “special agent” and Secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, as a “religious monomaniac.” Ezra Heywood’s critique of the institution of marriage, religion, and the mention of anything regarding sex was abhorrent to Christian conservatives like Comstock who declared *Cupid’s Yokes* “too foul for description.”

Josephine Tilton was a radical activist whose mother was Lucy M. Tilton, abolitionist, labor reformer, and also a free-love advocate. Josephine followed in her mother’s footsteps and worked as a compositor apprentice for William Lloyd Garrison’s antislavery periodical, *The Liberator*. She brought six hundred copies of *Cupid’s Yokes* to the convention hoping to raise money for the poverty-stricken Heywood children. Business was slow until the fifteen-cent pamphlet got the attention of the local authorities.

Later that afternoon a police officer and constable arrived at the grove and arrested D.M. Bennett, W.S. Bell, and Josephine Tilton. Bennett provided his account of the circumstances leading up to the arrest in the *Truth Seeker*:

We had a variety of books of our publication for sale, but not a copy of *Cupid’s Yokes* was upon our table. Miss Tilton had a contiguous table, upon which she offered for sale several of Mr. Heywood’s pamphlets, photographs, etc. Among the pamphlets was the tabooed *Cupid’s Yokes*. We are not sure that we sold a copy of it, but if we did it was to aid Miss Tilton when away or unable to attend to her customers. We put not a cent of the money for *Cupid’s Yokes* in our pockets, nor did we have a cent of profit from the sale of them. Mr. Bell simply proffered his services to help us in selling our books as a matter of kindness, without remuneration of any kind. If he sold any of *Cupid’s Yokes*, it was during her absence and as a matter of kindness.

The person to whom Bennett sold *Cupid’s Yokes*, Warren Hurd, happened to be the brother of the Schuyler County grand jury judge. The three were arraigned, all pled not guilty, and bail was set at \$1,000 each. At their arraignment someone remarked that the trio looked like “the father, son and holy-ghost.” The entrepreneurial *Truth Seeker* editor immediately had a photograph taken of the three defendants and converted the image into a cabinet card called “The Trinity” which sold for fifteen cents.

When the crowd gathered in the grove Saturday afternoon and learned of the arrests, they became indignant. Freethought activist Lucy Colman and other scheduled speakers expressed their collective anger from the platform. “I am proud to stand bail for the editor of *The Truth Seeker*,” proclaimed seventy-five-year-old Amy Post, one of the three women who provided bail for the trio. During her anti-slavery days, the courageous Quaker abolitionist harbored on average one hundred fifty runaway slaves in her home a year for more than twelve years. Her last years were spent as a prominent suffragist and freethinker. Post was a gentle-hearted pacifist whose reprimands of Anthony Comstock were filled with

sentiments of pity for her “dear” enemy’s mother—Mrs. Comstock!

When D.M. Bennett and W.S. Bell finally returned to the meeting grounds, they were met with loud applause and hundreds of people eagerly shook their hands. The evening session was again held in the opera house. The highlight of the night was an address by James Parton, the late nineteenth century’s most popular historical biographer whose speech was “The Coming Man’s Religion: Will He Have Any?”

The arrests, along with the rain that night, dampened the spirit of the final day. The Sunday morning meeting had to be held in the opera house due to the rain. Liberal League president Elizur Wright read a paper titled “Creed and Religion as a Cultivator of Political Hypocrisy.” The afternoon saw sunshine, and a large portrait of Robert Ingersoll was presented to the secretary of the New York Freethinkers’ Association in appreciation of his labors. The last meeting held in the opera house included a heated discussion concerning the Comstock Laws. The night ended with an announcement of a defense fund for Bennett, Bell, and Tilton; a total of \$133.00 was raised.

Below, left:
EZRA HEYWOOD
(1829-1883)

Below, right, and
previous spread
WATKINS GLEN
COWBOYS

(Continued on page 54)





Christianity and Women— Roots of Oppression

By Cameron Filas

Many Christians boast about the importance of women in their religion and contend that Christianity is and has been a platform for gender equality. But is there actually any merit to these claims?

Let's start by taking a look at the central text to the Christian religion. In the Bible as a whole, things women say only represent around 1% of the total text. Only around half of those women are even named. This data is the result of research by Rev. Lindsay Hardin Freeman as detailed in a 2015 *Huffington Post* article. What the data shows is that Bible was written by men for men, which is exactly what you would expect a bunch of Bronze Age tribalistic peasants to come up with. But to be fair there are a few women who are "integral" to the Bible.

Perhaps the most iconic woman in Christianity is Mary, the mother of Jesus. She is often considered greatest among the important saints in Catholicism and there exist countless churches and food banks

This sounds all well and good, just two humans prospering together in paradise, except that Eve's sole purpose in the story is to bring about mankind's downfall.

bearing her name. But what was her actual role in Christianity? It seems she was nothing more than a vessel for God's plan. Because there are no intricate details about her impregnation, one might wonder whether she even gave consent to bear God's child. Christians often point to Luke 1:38 to show that Mary did provide consent, when she said to the messenger angel, "I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled." But is that consent? Despite the fact that no proof of this, or any, deity even exists, let's pause for a moment and really break down this argument.

To achieve consent for sexual acts, both parties must be adults who are functioning at their full mental capacity and both must agree to each stage of the encounter. This presents numerous issues for the Christian story. First, Mary was a young girl, estimated to be between 10 and 14 years of age when this all allegedly occurred. Even *if* she did provide full consent, this is still statutory rape because she was

underage. Second, no explanation of what would occur actually happened. The angel simply told Mary, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus." (Luke 1:30-31) When Mary asked how this could be possible, considering she was a virgin, the angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God...For no word from God will ever fail." (Luke 1:34-37) It was only then that Mary said, "may your word be fulfilled."

However, this cannot equate to consent considering the angel had not actually asked for it. This angelic messenger had only told Mary, "This is going to happen," and "God doesn't fail." In any modern court of law, this would certainly not constitute consent. The other major problem is that God, who represents the party who will be involved with Mary, is not even the one asking for consent! To recreate this in a different scenario: An employee of a company approaches a young teenage girl. He tells her that his boss really likes her. His boss is going to have his way with her and she will get pregnant and she will name the baby whatever the boss wants. His boss never fails at getting his way. The young virgin says, "may your word be fulfilled." Then the employee signals to the boss that he can come in and do his thing. This sounds like rape. At the very least this does not at all sound like legitimate consent.

The final feather in the cap is the fact that Mary *was already betrothed!* Her fiancé Joseph hadn't even been with her when God decided he fancied her young virgin body and had his way with her. But perhaps it's not rape if God does it? Perhaps this young teenage virgin really thought she wanted to serve her God? Either way, one thing should be crystal clear: God used a young virgin's body for his own purposes when he easily could have created Jesus out of nothing. When analyzed more deeply, this forcible use of a young virgin girl's uterus certainly does not sound like something which should be celebrated by anyone.

Speaking of creating humans from nothing, another woman who is vital to Christian mythology is Eve. After God created Adam in the Garden of Eden, he decided to give Adam a female partner which he created from one of Adam's ribs. This sounds all well and good, just two humans prospering together in paradise, except that Eve's sole purpose in the story is to bring about mankind's downfall. Eve is the one who stupidly eats the forbidden fruit and who guides Adam to do the same. This story, which some people

My America is gone... I realize that one of the primary reasons that it is over for America is because women are taking over.

– Reverend
Jesse Lee
Peterson,
President and
Founder of
BOND

still sadly believe is factual (despite the genealogical impossibility of such a scenario), has certainly been used against women to oppress equality throughout history. And of course this history is not some long-past Dark Age of misogyny. No, no, no. Christian oppression of women is alive and well today. Let's take a look at just a few of the best (worst?) examples from this decade.

You've certainly heard of the Salem witch trials, in which young women were murdered for imaginary crimes that the Bible describes as being real. What you may not know about is that even in the 21st century women are attacked for being "witches" by religious adherents. Take for example the instance in 2015, in Papua New Guinea, in which four women were brutally tortured because a villager fell ill and they were suspected of sorcery and having "stolen" his heart from his body.

The anonymous author at BiblicalGenderRoles.com wrote in a 2015 response to a reader's question, about whether a wife can refuse her husband's sexual advances in a Christian marriage, "The answer to this question is a Christian wife should never give her husband a flat no, BUT she can humbly and gently ask for a delay. There may be legitimate physical or other issues that might prompt your wife to ask you for a delay. But this must be done humbly and respectfully, and always with the attitude in mind that her body does belong to her husband." Rape is okay in Christianity, because your wife is your property! While this might seem totally horrific, or even contrary to something hippie-Jesus might've preached, one must remember that even in the revered Ten Commandments the woman is listed as property, along with cattle, which should not be coveted.

Pastor Jeff Crawford, President of Cross Church Ministries in Arkansas, said in 2015, "Our soul and our spirit is uniquely linked to our body. They cannot be separated. This idea you hear about in the abortion debate, that it's a woman's right to choose and she has a right over her own body—no! That's not true!" At least Pastor Crawford tried to be sly in his anti-woman, anti-abortion sermon. It's all about the "link between body and soul," not just that he thinks women shouldn't have control over their own bodies.

Dr. Stephen Kim, founding Pastor of Mustard Seed Church in New York, wrote an article in 2014 titled "10 Women Christian Men Should Not Marry" in which he specifically mentioned: non-Christian women, divorcees, any woman older than the perspective reader, feminists, immodest dressers,

Opposite THE GARDEN OF EDEN WITH THE FALL OF MAN BY PETER PAUL RUBENS AND JAN BRUEGHEL THE ELDER, CIRCA 1615. PUBLIC DOMAIN {{PD-1923}}

gossipers, women who don't want children, women who dream of traveling, women who place emphasis on their careers, and any woman who doesn't make time daily for her relationship with God. In essence, Christian men need to seek out only pious younger women who are ready to become stay-at-home moms. This guy is probably the mayor of Equality Town.

Pastor Bill Lytell, of the Gospel Baptist Church in Florida, said in a sermon to his congregation in 2015, "I want to talk to you about the principle here of management...Now every one of you are in some form or fashion, a manager. You women who stay at home and don't have a secular job, are to manage your home. Now you have a supervisor over the top of you, of course. But you manage the home. You are responsible for buying the groceries, make sure there's food, make sure the house is kept impeccable, to have a hot meal waiting when your husband gets home, to have the house all cleaned up, laundry all done, dishes all done, baby all fed, squared away, and meet him at the door looking like a million bucks. That's probably some of the best marriage advice you ever got." If you haven't noticed yet, this obedient Stepford-wife theme is relentless in Christian communities.

Reverend Jesse Lee Peterson, President and Founder of BOND, an organization meant to "Rebuild the Family by Rebuilding Man," said in 2012, "I want to say goodbye to America. It's over. My America is gone...I realize that one of the primary reasons that it is over for America is because women are taking over. They're in high, so-called powerful, positions. Now they're running companies, they're making decisions. Not all, not all...There are some out there who are logical and can make sound decisions. But most cannot. And one thing I know for sure, without a doubt: women cannot handle power. It's not in them to handle power in the right way. They don't know what to do with it. And secondly it's not real power anyways. Power that the world gives you is not power, it's all ego building. Real and true power comes from God. And God is the one who gave man the power and the authority over the wife...And one thing I realize that the world has done to women: women have been degraded. They have no shame...There was a woman from Georgetown University...She testified before a committee about condoms and birth control and stuff...she said women need to get free birth control...This woman is sitting there testifying about how much sex they're having out of wedlock and all these women into all this stuff with no shame. Women would not have done that in the good old days.

To be perfectly fair to Christianity, all three of the major monotheistic religions have been and are oppressive to women.

There would have been a sense of shame about it... She didn't realize that she looked like a slut sitting there making that type of confession. I'm thinking, wow, what happened to women that this is ok for them to escort themselves in that way? How did we get to a point that women think we should pay for them to have sex? How did we get to a point that they want to force us to buy them birth control?...I think one of the greatest mistakes America made was to allow women the opportunity to vote...It was a big mistake." The entire sermon runs about twelve minutes. And yes, the entire sermon is that ignorant and sexist. It's actually hard to narrow it down to just the worst bits.

Just in 2015 there are dozens more examples of prominent leaders in the Christian community using their religion, holy book, and private line to "God" to oppress and belittle women. Historically there are of course countless other issues such as the aforementioned Salem witch trials, the firing of school teachers who became pregnant (even if they were married), the delay in achieving women's suffrage, the sustenance of the belief that women are man's property and that their only role is childbirth and homemaking, the refusal of accepting female priests in the Catholic church (still in effect today), and of course the age-old verse in the New Testament, "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says." (1 Corinth. 14:34)

To be perfectly fair to Christianity, all three of the major monotheistic religions have been and are oppressive to women. However, in regard to Christianity, one thing cannot be ignored. That is that Christianity has been the dominant religion in the United States since the country's inception and is more represented in the one political party which continues to fight against contraception, equal pay, abortion, and healthcare for women. In the continued fight for gender equality in the world today, it should be recognized that the roots of much of the existing oppression stem from Christianity. The best way to fight evil is to understand its source. In this case, and perhaps not surprisingly, it is religion.

Cameron Filas is an avid reader and novice author, usually of short fiction. Every now and then he finds time in his busy schedule to examine his reasons for being an atheist and study the claims of theists. Cameron remains, thus far, unconvinced by any theistic explanation of the world or meaning of life. Visit his author webpage at www.cameronfilas.wordpress.com

Ingersoll in *Soprano*

**Helen Hamilton Gardener,
Freethinking Feminist**



By Kimberly A. Hamlin, PhD

Sometime between 1875 and the early 1880s, Mary Alice Chenoweth (1853-1925) packed up her meager belongings in Sandusky, Ohio, where she was the youngest school principal in state history, and moved to New York City where she remade herself as Helen Hamilton Gardener. Or, as she was known on the freethought lecture circuit, "Ingersoll in Soprano."

Descended from a prosperous and influential family (famous ancestors included Oliver Cromwell), this bold move was one of many pioneering and unorthodox life decisions that Gardener made on her way to becoming one of the most well-known reformist writers of the era (she published seven books in all), a leading suffragist, and, at the time of her death, the highest-ranking woman in federal government.

Shortly after Gardener’s arrival in New York City, she began publishing freethought essays in New York newspapers anonymously and under pseudonyms. She also audited science classes at Columbia University (women were not allowed to formally register) and taught at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences. Eventually these activities brought her into contact with Robert Ingersoll, the “Great Agnostic,” and the most popular speaker on the 19th-century lyceum circuit. Ingersoll encouraged Gardener to begin lecturing and introduced her first public talks in 1884. At 5’2” and just over 100 pounds, she must have made a striking visual contrast to the hulking Ingersoll. But her ideas matched his in their vigor and clarity. And she provided something Ingersoll could never articulate—a woman’s perspective.

The three lectures from her 1884 lecture series (“Men, Women, and Gods;” “Vicarious Atonement;” and “Historical Facts and Theological Fictions”) were published in book form the following year as *Men, Women, and Gods, and Other Lectures*, a volume that went into at least thirteen editions and was widely reviewed. In these addresses, Gardener’s strove to convince her audience that Christian doctrine was built upon the subjugation of women; that the Bible contained numerous stories justifying and/or encouraging inexcusable treatment of women (and others); and that biblical lessons could not possibly stand the test of reason. She encouraged women, 7/10ths of church members according to Gardener, to turn the light of rational thought upon their blind faith and reject the religion that characterized them as second-class and excused abuses against them. To persuade her audience of these radical views, Gardener relied on humor, close reading of the Bible, and the words and reputation of Ingersoll.

Gardener dedicated her first book to Mrs. Eva Ingersoll “the brave, happy wife of America’s greatest orator and woman’s truest friend, in her beautiful home-life superstition and fear have never entered; human equality and freedom have their highest illustration; and time has deepened youthful love into a diviner worship than angels offer or gods inspire.” Gardener’s dedication offered Eva Ingersoll as a freethinking counterpoint to the religious wives

Ingersoll encouraged Gardener to begin lecturing and introduced her first public talks in 1884.

who comprised her target audience and neatly foreshadowed the goals of her book (and, indeed, her life’s work): to convince women that they would be even better wives, mothers, and humans if they abandoned Christian faith and turned to reason.

If Eva Ingersoll served as the model wife in Gardener’s freethinking cosmology, then Robert Ingersoll provided the ideal husband. Ingersoll’s reputation as a doting husband and father of two muted and made acceptable the radicalism of his critiques of religion. Gardener frequently invoked Ingersoll as not only an ideal man but also as an ideal leader of the nation, often comparing him to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

During her first decade of public life, Gardener drew inspiration, ideas, and audiences from Ingersoll’s tutelage and reputation. In his six-page introduction to *Men, Women and Gods*, however, Ingersoll barely mentioned Gardener. Instead, he emphasized the importance of a female’s perspective on free-thought and the vital necessity of recruiting more women to the movement. Ingersoll enthusiastically reported that “Nothing gives me more pleasure, nothing gives greater promise for the future, than the fact that woman is achieving intellectual and physical liberty. It is refreshing to know that here, in our country, there are thousands of women who think and express their own thoughts—who are thoroughly free



Right HELEN H. GARDENER

Opening page
FRONTISPIECE
FROM *MEN, WOMEN,
AND GODS, AND
OTHER LECTURES*,
PUBLISHED BY THE
TRUTH SEEKER
COMPANY, 1885

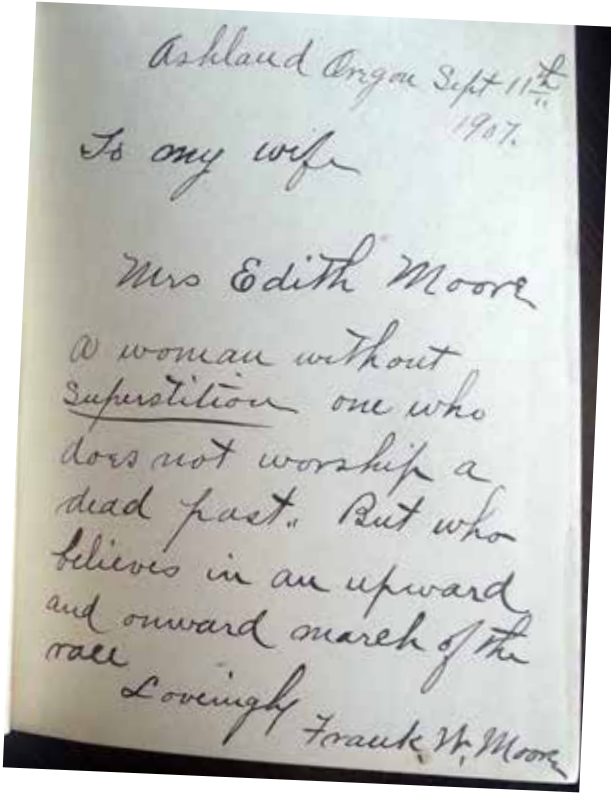
and thoroughly conscientious—who have neither been narrowed nor corrupted by a heartless creed—who do not worship a being in heaven whom they would shudderingly loathe on earth.”

The main problem with women’s lingering religious faith, according to Ingersoll’s introduction, was that it drove a wedge between husbands and wives. Wives, he noted, faithfully attended church each Sunday, while husbands “prefer the shores, the woods, or the fields.” Such differences drove families apart because wives could not be intellectual companions to their husbands: “she reads the ‘Christian Register,’ sermons in the Monday papers, and a little gossip about folks and fashions, while he studies the works of Darwin, Haeckel and Humbolt.” Ingersoll concluded that “such wives should read this book.” And wives did read Gardener’s book, as evidenced by the inscription on my own copy of *Men, Women, and Gods*. Frank W. Moore of Ashland, Oregon gave this book to his wife, Edith, on September 11, 1907. He “lovingly” inscribed it to her as follows: “A woman without superstition one who does not worship a dead past. But who believes in an upward and onward march of the race.”

While Ingersoll focused on freethought’s implications for wives, Gardener emphasized the movement’s benefits to women more broadly. At the outset of her first lecture, “Men, Women, and Gods,” Gardener boldly claimed her right to offer her perspective on the Bible. “It is thought strange and particularly shocking by some persons for a woman to question the absolute correctness of the Bible. She is supposed to be able to go through this world with her eyes shut, and her mouth open wide enough to swallow Jonah and the Garden of Eden without making a wry face. It is usually recounted as one of her most beautiful traits of character that she has faith sufficient to float the Ark without inspecting the animals... I claim, however, that if she honestly thinks there is anything wrong about them, she has a right to say so. I claim that I have a right to offer my objections to the Bible from the standpoint of a woman.” Gardener dispensed with the religion “of men for men” and instead endorsed “Col. Ingersoll’s style of theology.”

During her initial foray into public life, Gardener’s relationship to Robert Ingersoll framed her public presentation and reception. In addition to including Ingersoll’s introduction to her first book, she also began her next two collections of freethought writings with epigraphs from Ingersoll (*A Thoughtless Yes*, 1890 and *Pushed by Unseen Hands*, 1892). Reviewers, too, noted Gardener’s relationship with Ingersoll—

Right FRANK W. MOORE’S INSCRIPTION TO HIS WIFE ON A COPY OF *MEN, WOMEN, AND GODS*.



Gardener’s [address] strove to convince her audience that Christian doctrine was built upon the subjugation of women; that the Bible contained numerous stories justifying and/or encouraging inexcusable treatment of women...

or perhaps more to the point, his relationship to her. The *New York Sun* referred to her as “Ingersoll in Soprano,” the catchy moniker that was repeated in numerous “who’s who” biography entries of Gardener throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. H.L. Green, a prominent freethinker, reviewed *Men, Women, and Gods*, describing it as “more radical, sarcastic and heretical than the writings of ‘Tom’ Paine and some Christians declare that it is more ‘blasphemous’ than anything Col. ‘Bob’ ever published.” *The Women’s Penny Paper*, a British feminist periodical, also began its review of Gardener’s lectures by quoting Ingersoll. This review went on to describe Gardener as a “bright, effervescing, sweet little woman; she has the courage of her opinions, from which opinions we mostly differ.”

Indeed, one of Gardener’s great frustrations in life was her inability to convince most women that the main point of Christian orthodoxy was to justify and enforce female subservience. Far from being a friend to women, Gardener asserted, “This religion and the Bible require of woman everything and give her nothing.” She systematically investigated what the Bible and pulpit taught regarding women and found countless stories of sexual abuse, violence, and exploitation, noting “though I cannot soil my lips nor your ears with much of it, there is enough, I think, that I may use to make any self-respecting, pure woman blush that she has sustained it by word or act.”

As she wrote in her most famous essay, “Sex in Brain” (1888), nothing could taint a man’s view of women more than a belief in the Genesis creation story. Orthodox believers, no doubt, considered “‘Adam as a creature after God’s own heart and in his image,’ and therefore capable of deserving of all opportunity and development for and because of himself, and to promote his own happiness.” Whereas Eve became a “mere bone or rib of contention as it were, between man and man.” “The more literal and consistent his faith,” charged Gardener, “the less likely is he to deal with woman as an intellectual being, capable of and entitled to the same or as liberal, mental, social, and financial opportunities or rights as are universally conceded in this country to the be the birthright of man.” To counter such age-old superstitions, Gardener encouraged readers to hold religious doctrines to the light of reason and dispense with them if they did not make practical sense. As she wittily advised in “Men, Women, and Gods,” “Man cannot believe what he will, he must believe what he must. If his brain tells him one thing and his catechism tells him another, his brain ought to win. You don’t leave your umbrella at home during a storm, simply because the almanac calls for a clear day.”

In many ways, Gardener’s freethought writings on women prefigured Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *Woman’s Bible* (1895, 1898) and Matilda Joslyn Gage’s *Woman, Church and State* (1893). Like Stanton, Gardener teased apart biblical passages regarding women; offered rationalistic, pragmatic responses to such topics as polygamy, incest, and rape; admonished women for clinging to a text that taught they were a secondary creation; and questioned the legitimacy of the Bible as a sacred text. Like Gage, she pointed nostalgically to a pre-Christian, pagan era during which women supposedly enjoyed equal rights and opportunities. During the 1880s and 1890s, Gardener was closely associated with Stanton and Gage, so it is not surprising that they shared common beliefs. She considered Stanton her closest ally and friend, served as a member of Stanton’s Woman’s Bible revising committee, and joined Gage’s short-lived Woman’s National Liberal Union—the more radical alternative to the 1890 merger of the National and American Woman Suffrage Associations.

In the late 1880s, Gardener turned her attention to science and focused on debunking the popular idea that women’s brains were “naturally” inferior to men’s (for more on this see chapter 2 of my book *From Eve to Evolution*). In the early 1890s, she moved to Boston where she edited the freethought publication the *Arena*. She also took on the one cause per-

Gardener frequently invoked Ingersoll as not only an ideal man but also as an ideal leader of the nation, often comparing him to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

Her suffrage colleagues, many of whom were too young to have witnessed or read her earlier speeches and writings, largely purged the historical record of references to Gardener’s atheism.

haps more taboo than atheism: exposing the sexual double standard between men and women and, especially, the practice of grown men having sex with young girls. She published two novels, *Is this Your Son, My Lord?* (1890) and *Pray You, Sir, Whose Daughter?* (1892), credited with garnering public support to raise the age of sexual consent, which was then as low as eight in some states.

In the 1910s, Gardener reemerged in public life as a leading suffragist and a Vice President of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Gardener’s freethought ideology also influenced her ideas about women’s rights. Like her mentor Robert Ingersoll, she argued for a secular republic, populated by virtuous citizens committed to each other’s welfare in this life, not to an unknowable God in the hereafter. Gardener frequently referenced her fellow “infidel” Thomas Jefferson in her writings and espoused a highly individualistic view of democracy—a sort of 19th-century female version of Jefferson’s self-sufficient farmer.

After women attained the vote in 1920, President Woodrow Wilson appointed Gardener to Teddy Roosevelt’s former seat on the U.S. Civil Service Commission, making her the highest-ranking woman in federal government. In this capacity, she had the opportunity to put some of her ideas about women and government into practice. Civil Service work represented the secular, non-partisan citizen government that Gardener imagined as the ideal, and it was an area of employment where Gardener believed a person could rise or fall by his or her own efforts. Civil Service jobs, she wrote, “were not political or personal ‘spoils’ by which the worthless brother or the half-witted niece or the drunken friend of some political worker—some professional politician- was rewarded for his work for the successful candidate.” She further believed these opportunities should go to both men and women, and she worked assiduously to increase women’s presence in Civil Service posts.

Beyond her outspoken commitment to a secular republic free from gender bias, Gardener was largely silent regarding her freethinking views in the 1900s. Her suffrage colleagues, many of whom were too young to have witnessed or read her earlier speeches and writings, largely purged the historical record of references to Gardener’s atheism. In the booklet of eulogies from Gardener’s 1925 funeral, none of the speakers except for former NAWSA president Carrie Chapman Catt alluded to Gardener’s secularism. Catt noted that Gardener’s “most amazing characteristic” was that she was not afraid to die, which Catt attributed to Gardener’s lack of belief in the hereafter. Gar-

dener’s obituaries did not reference her freethinking beliefs either, other than to note that she requested a simple service at her home rather than in a church.

Throughout her 72 years of life, Gardener encouraged women to use their brains and demanded that men acknowledge women as rational agents. Thus, perhaps Gardener’s most interesting legacy is her own brain, which she donated to Cornell University for scientific study (where it remains on public display today). After years of arguing against biased brain science and for female intellectual equality, Gardener thought that her brain could settle the question of women’s intellectual potential. As she explained in her will, Burt Wilder, the founder of the Cornell brain collection that bears his name, had invited her to submit her brain for study as a “representative of the brains of women who have used their brains for the public welfare.” After having spent her life “using such brains as I possess in trying to better the conditions of humanity and especially of women,” she happily granted this request. As Gardener hoped, her brain did what her pen could not: it established once and for all that her intellect had not been handicapped by her sex. Under the headline “Woman’s Brain Not Inferior

As Gardener hoped, her brain did what her pen could not: it established once and for all that her intellect had not been handicapped by her sex.

Below, left HELEN GARDENER’S BRAIN, PHOTO COURTESY OF SHEILA DEAN
Below, right NEW YORK TIMES, SEPTEMBER 29, 1927

to Men’s,” the *New York Times*, reporting on James Papez’s exhaustive analysis, declared that Gardener’s brain “posthumously substantiated her life-long contention that, given the same environment, woman’s brains are the equal of man’s.” Gardener’s highly publicized brain donation cemented her legacy as a citizen and a (free)thinker, and it reminds us all of the vital connections between ideologies of gender, religion, and science.

PROFESSOR KIMBERLY A. HAMLIN is associate professor of American Studies and History at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where she also directs the American Studies Program. The author of *From Eve to Evolution: Darwin, Science, and Women’s Rights in Gilded Age America* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), Hamlin is currently working on a full-length biography of Helen Hamilton Gardener. For more information, visit www.kimberlyhamlin.com (PHOTO BY MIKKI SCHAFFNER)



There is nothing new about child abuse in the Catholic Church—it’s been going on for hundreds of years, if not from its very inception.

Spotlight was the name given to the *Boston Globe’s* special investigation unit that uncovered the Roman Catholic clergy’s sexual abuse scandal. With an ensemble cast led by Michael Keaton, playing Walter “Robby” Robinson, the dedicated but silently remorseful leader of the Spotlight team, the film grabs you from the beginning and methodically and painstakingly takes you through a torturous maze of power, deceit, sex, greed, complicity and ecclesiastical omnipotence.

Sexual abuse of children by priests is not the story of *Spotlight* any more than a burglary at the Watergate building was the story in *All the President’s Men*. Both films chronicled Pulitzer Prize winning investigative journalism that exposed cover-ups at the highest levels—President Nixon covering-up the burglary of the Democratic National Committee’s headquarters in the Watergate office complex and Cardinal Bernard Law, the Archbishop of Boston, covering-up the sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy.

Law and his minions must have been aware of the serious consequences of allowing the abuse to continue. Although it would be tremendously embarrassing to publicly admit that sexual abuse of children under their watch had occurred, it would be far worse if it became known that they knew and did nothing about it—not to mention facilitating continued sexual abuse by moving offending priests from one parish to another where they can abuse again. So why the cover-up?

Heard on the telephone but never seen in the movie was Richard Sipe, an ex-priest who was a psychotherapist at Maryland’s Seton Psychiatric Institute. He collected the case histories of about 500 “troubled” priests who were at the institute for “treatment” along with an equal number of case histories of lay people who had sexual relationships with priests either as adults or children.

These studies were the basis for his explosive treatise *A Secret World* which revealed that almost half of all priests were having sexual relationships and that 6% of these sexually active priests had sex with minors.

Based on this percentage, Spotlight reporters calculated with 1,500 priests in the Boston area, that 90 of them would be pedophiles. They found 87. Is it really too much of a stretch to conclude that the 6% figure also included sexually abusive priests who had moved up the ecclesiastical ladder and may still be engaging in sex with minors?

David Clohessy, director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), an organization featured prominently



By
LANNY SWERDLOW

Perhaps they are privately relenting that the Church’s most grievous error was the failure to make a sacrament of their sexual abuse of minors. Not only would mothers piously offer up their children but it would solve the ongoing shortage of priests.

In scene after scene *Spotlight* illuminates the grasp of the Church extending to government and police agencies who not only turned a blind eye to these sordid events, but participated in the cover-up. Even the law firm representing many of the abused children was in cahoots with the Church to keep the abuse quiet and to minimize financial losses.

Sipe places the blame squarely at the celibate patriarchal hierarchical foundation of the Catholic Church stating that “real change will not come until the church allows optional celibacy and the ordination of women.”

The Crusades, medieval witch hunts, torture of heretics, the Spanish Inquisition, genocide committed against Native Americans, collusion with Nazis and complicity in the holocaust are just some of the more well-known atrocities committed by the Catholic Church against millions and millions of people throughout the world. The fact that tens of thousands of boys and girls were sexually abused by priests is but the continuation of the Church’s never ending millennial legion of horrors.

LANNY SWERDLOW, RN, LNC, was a member of the Portland Chapter of American Atheists and President of United States Atheists from around 1995–1999. During that time, he produced a series of half-hour television programs called *Bunkbusters* for Portland Oregon Cable Access. The show featured interviews with atheists, the most illustrious being a discussion with Richard Dawkins. Lanny’s had articles and op-eds published in *Desert Sun*, *Riverside Press Enterprise*, *San Bernardino Sun*, *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*, *West Coast Leaf*, *The Californian*, *North County Times*, *High Desert Star*, and *Desert Star*.

in the movie, agrees saying that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church would be very fearful of exposure by priests being prosecuted and then, in exchange for leniency, “spilling the beans.”.

There is nothing new about child abuse in the Catholic Church—it’s been going on for hundreds of years, if not from its very inception. Its continuing enormity today is documented at www.bishopaccountability.com.

The child sex abuse exposed in *Spotlight* was different only in that previous cover-ups were never exposed or the Church never felt it necessary to cover up the atrocities in the first place. Like the philandering husband who is sorry only because he got caught, the Church refuses to hold accountable the abusers and the facilitators. The SNAP website reports that even the much celebrated Pope Francis “has not exposed a single child molesting cleric or really punished a single complicit church official.”

BRIGIT CLARKE-SMITH

Proud American Atheist



Brigit Clarke-Smith has done a lot of living in her 87 years. Recently the former “Mrs. Altoona” and “Mrs. Pennsylvania” founded her Atheists Anonymous organization at the La Costa Glen retirement community in Carlsbad, California. San Diego’s KPBS television station televised a segment about Brigit and her atheist activism.

Brigit was also a guest speaker at the 2015 American Atheists Convention in Memphis, Tennessee. One of the highlights of her appearance in Memphis was meeting another outspoken and courageous female atheist—Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somali-born politician and acclaimed author. In 2004, Ali and director Theo van Gogh collaborated on *Submission*, a film critical of the treatment of women in Islam. Both Ali and van Gogh (great-grandson of painter Vincent van Gogh’s brother) received death threats. Soon after their 10-minute film was broadcast on Dutch public television, Van Gogh was assassinated by a Muslim fanatic. Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s latest book

is *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*.

“Courage,” as Brigit likes to say, “is more exhilarating than fear.” Brigit’s well-received 27-minute speech in Memphis along with her appearance on KPBS in San Diego can be viewed on YouTube by searching “Brigit Clarke-Smith” and “Atheists Anonymous at La Costa Glen.” The La Costa Glen YouTube video has nearly 9,000 views with comments ranging from: “This is really awesome!” and “You are one brave woman” to “I just prayed for you Brigit, please repent, deep in your heart you’ve always known the truth, please stop running from God.”

BRIGIT: I first heard about atheists in my hometown of Altoona, Pennsylvania. I met a woman at my drapery workshop and who had some atheistic reading material which I asked her about. “Anyone who isn’t an atheist isn’t thinking well,” she told me. She also suggested that I take my children to the Penn State Unitarian Church which was 36 miles away. We went and I found them to be open minded and an intellectual group.

TS: When and why did you move to Beverly Hills?

BRIGIT: When we were living in Altoona, the next door neighbor was a very famous dentist, Dr. Fred Miller. One day Dr. Miller asked if I would invite Bob Cummings over for dinner because he knew I cooked healthy meals. Robert Cummings was there getting dental work done by Dr. Miller who is considered the father of restorative dentistry.

TS: Who was Robert Cummings?

BRIGIT: Robert Cummings starred in two Alfred Hitchcock thrillers *Saboteur* in 1942 and *Dial M for Murder* in 1954. Bob Cummings had a few famous television programs “Love That Bob” and “My Hero” and “The Bob Cummings Show.” He and Ronald Reagan were best friends and were in the movie *King’s Row*.

TS: So you were aware of who Bob Cummings was and that he was famous?

BRIGIT: Yes, of course. And it turned out to be an interesting evening. It was 1964 and Bob had just come to Altoona from Broadway where he was in a play which was closed down because it mentioned abortion. And another close friend of our family was Father Augustine Cestario who also attended the dinner. He was Head of the Franciscan Order. His mother was the sister of Vito Genovese of the famous Mafia Family. Father Cestario was approached when he was in the seventh grade by three Mafia members who asked the young kid: “You wanna be an Attorney or a Priest?” His response was, “I’ll think about it.” “No you won’t. We wanna know now,” was their firm response. “Okay,” he said, “I’ll be a priest.”

TS: Were your parents religious?

BRIGIT: When my father was drinking we went to the Calvary Baptist church which was in walking distance to our home. When he was sober we drove to the the Third Presbyterian church. My father was running for political office and was a Republican legislator under William Scranton in 1960. Father Augustine Cestario was a friend and frequent visitor. Father Augustine was one of our very best friends. He was very fond of my father.

TS: Being an unbeliever, how did you get along with this Catholic priest?

BRIGIT: Father Augustine’s Parish was 10,000 people. From the pulpit he told them to “VOTE FOR BOB CLARKE FOR STATE LEGISLATURE.” Yes, from the pulpit! How’s that for separation of church and state? I occasionally did some favors for him. I drove him in his black Cadillac Sedan DeVille to and from Governor Rockefeller’s office at 30 Rockefeller Plaza in

New York City. I also drove him to the Pittsburgh Airport and picked him up there after a mafia family Miami meeting. He had diabetes. His eyes and feet were affected.

TS: Why did you move to California from Altoona, Pennsylvania?

BRIGIT: Bob Cummings brought me out first and I stayed at Carroll Righter’s Hollywood home and I went to his church Carithesia. Carroll Righter was the world’s most famous astrologer. I liked Carroll very much and felt obligated to attend his church.

TS: Was Bob Cummings an atheist?

BRIGIT: Bob Cummings was interested in Science of the Mind, and was a freethinker. But he was not a true atheist. In 1966 Bob Cummings took me and my children to a Unitarian Church in Beverly Hills. Wild, full of hippies etc. We also went to a Mormon church. “I am God, you are God, we are God,” was Bob’s philosophy. He was interested in all religions. He also said that he believed that the greatest love a man can have for a woman is a love without sex.

TS: What did you do for a living in Beverly Hills?

BRIGIT: I was an interior designer and worked with some of the most famous architects and Hollywood actors and producers. I was best friends with John Lautner and lived in his famous rainbow house which was featured in the movie *Lethal Weapon 2*.

TS: When and where did you meet Madalyn Murray O’Hair?

BRIGIT: In the mid-1980s my husband Bo and I met Madalyn O’Hair at the 22nd national convention of American Atheists in Scottsdale, Arizona. She just loved Bo. And we both found her to be a very bright woman. And she was an excellent speaker.

TS: What year did you start your Atheist Anonymous group here at La Costa Glen?

BRIGIT: In August of 2009 I founded Atheists Anonymous here at La Costa Glen retirement community. What got me thinking about organizing a meeting was an incident which occurred when I first arrived here. While sitting in the dining room I began talking to a couple in their late 90s. A woman approached me and asked: “Are you a Christian?” I thought it was a strange question that I was never asked before. Actually I never really was a Christian so I didn’t know exactly how to respond. I think I was an atheist since I was a kid. I finally said: “I’m an atheist.” The woman stormed out and the little elderly woman that I was sitting with said, “Oh my, we’re atheists but we like to remain anonymous.” And there were other people who would come up to me and say that they didn’t want anyone to know they were atheists. So for the next few months that’s what I thought about. I thought this is really a crime. These people are practically ready to die and they can’t even speak their mind. And they don’t think they’re allowed to be truthful.

TS: How did your idea to start an atheist club go over here at La Costa Glen?



Above BO SMITH, MADALYN MURRAY O’HAIR, AND BRIGIT CLARKE-SMITH

BRIGIT: It was really tough to get it started. At the first meeting we had 16 members and we then met once a month. When I approached the Head of activities here I was asked not to use the “A” (atheist) word.

TS: Why did you discontinue having monthly meetings for three years here at La Costa Glen?

BRIGIT: I stopped because it was too much work. But now, I’m considering reviving the organization. There’s still so much work to do.

TS: Have you hosted any other atheist related events here at La Costa Glen?

BRIGIT: Well as you know last year we screened the *American Freethought* film series here over a few months. I had seen the entire series a few months earlier at the San Diego Central Public Library. And I thought it would be a great series to show here at La Costa Glen. We decided to do it the same way it was screened at the San Diego Library. Each month we screened one of the episodes followed by a Q&A session. The four-hour series was received surprisingly well. Especially considering we have quite a few conservative Christians here at La Costa Glen. People purchased the DVD series and also bought the D.M. Bennett biography.

TS: After watching the local PBS clip about your La Costa Glen Atheists Anonymous club and the controversy it caused, I suspect it wasn’t easy persuading the management here to host a four episode screening of a series called *American Freethought*?

BRIGIT: It was a tough sell. Initially when I proposed screening a film series about the history of Freethought which included atheism, agnosticism, secularism, and censorship, the people in charge here were very reluctant to consider letting us use the theater. They didn’t even bother to watch or read any of the material I gave them describing the *American Freethought* series before making their decision. We tried to explain that

the series was really more about freedom of speech than atheism which seemed to convince them to let us host the events. “Well this is on your own,” I was told. “We will not publicize or put anything in the La Costa Glen newsletter. You can only put something in people’s mailboxes who were members of your Atheists Anonymous club.”

TS: How did you advertise and promote the screening?

BRIGIT: Pretty much word of mouth. And of course I’m still in touch with all of our Atheists Anonymous members so I encouraged them all to attend. I have the names of 93 people from when I was doing my Atheists Anonymous club. But the series was really well-received. One very far right conservative woman—a retired Philadelphia high school principal—surprised everyone after the third episode when she stood up and shouted: “This should be shown in every public school in America!”

TS: How was your recent trip to Memphis to the 2015 American Atheist convention?

BRIGIT: At the American Atheists convention in Tennessee, I spoke among many famous freethinkers. But there were also folks protesting the American Atheists convention in Memphis. People down there came up to me and said: “You’re not an atheist. You just think you are. God still loves you!”

TS: How does your family feel about your unbelief?

BRIGIT: My son is a Buddhist. And the young people I meet have a lack of interest in religion. My granddaughter just said to me the other day from New York that she doesn’t know one person of her age group that is not an atheist. I used to advise my grandson (who is now 23 and just graduated from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland) that when he was in the Boy Scouts and working toward Eagle Scout not to mention anything about atheists because they’re against atheists. “Grandmother, 75% of my friends are atheists. Seventy-five percent of the boy scouts are atheists.”

TS: Did you ever know any Scientologists in Los Angeles?

BRIGIT: My late brother’s daughter is a Scientologist who married a Scientologist and their daughter is a receptionist at the Celebrity Center in L.A.

TS: Did you ever express your opinion about Scientology being a cult to her?

BRIGIT: Yes and her response is always: “You don’t understand, Aunt Brigit.”

TS: Do you think these billboard campaigns by secular organizations is effective?

BRIGIT: I have a relative in Boston who is a conservative Christian and gets very upset whenever he sees one.

TS: At 87 years old, you must think about mortality?

BRIGIT: I’m not afraid to die, but I don’t want to. I just think that it’s natural. I certainly don’t think there’s an afterlife. I don’t want a memorial and want to be cremated.

TS: Do you have any regrets about not being more active in atheism during your lifetime?

BRIGT: My children were the most important thing to me. We lived in Altoona, Pennsylvania which is a very conservative area. So I would have not have advertised my atheism because of my concern for my children. So we went to the Presbyterian church until I met the woman who told me about the Unitarian church.

TS: Was your late husband Bo Smith an atheist?

BRIGIT: Interesting question. Because for three or four years, Bo kept asking me to marry him. But I loved him so much, I was deeply concerned that if he knew that I was an atheist, he might not have wanted to marry me. One day Bo was telling me a story and he mentioned that his father was an atheist. I screamed: "I am an atheist!" Bo quietly responded: "I am as well, Brigit," and went on telling the story. And we were married a few months later in Kennebunkport, Maine.

TS: In addition to your atheist activism, are you involved with any other organizations?

BRIGIT: I've been involved with the Soroptimist Club* for 35-years. Our mission is to help women and girls. We try to stop sexual trafficking. We give scholarships to women and girls who will benefit from it. It's a great organization and is international. I do Yoga three times a week. I like to walk. I just got a citation for walking 175 miles in our trek around the world we had here at La Costa Glen. Exercising keeps your brain going. Two years ago I went down to the University of California at San Diego UCSD and spoke for the American Atheists.

TS: Do you have any future atheist activities planned for here at La Costa Glen?

BRIGIT: I have been thinking about that. Quite a few residents would like to see me repeat my Atheists Anonymous monthly meetings. La Costa Glen really is the best Senior citizen residence. Not only in this country, but we have had Beijing entrepreneurs (and others) visit our facility. My understanding is that they are building similar La Costa Glen communities in China. They were not the only visitors with that thought in mind. The letters, emails and phone calls I have received are very much in favor of the fact that Atheists were openly represented and accepted in a Senior citizen residence.

Right BRIGIT CLARKE-SMITH, 2015
PHOTOGRAPHED BY RODERICK BRADFORD

Opening page BRIGIT CLARKE-SMITH
PHOTOGRAPHED BY CELEBRATED
HOLLYWOOD PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHER
WALLACE SEAWELL, 1967




TS: Who is your favorite freethinker in the history of the movement?

BRIGIT: By far Robert Green Ingersoll is my hero. I just love that man!

TS: Do you think it's important for atheists, young and old, to learn more about the history of unbelief in America and people like Robert Ingersoll, D.M. Bennett, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and all the famous female freethinkers who we focus on in this Heroines of American Freethought issue of the *Truth Seeker*?

BRIGIT: Absolutely! So many people who sat and watched the Freethought film series commented on how interesting the history is and wondered why they never heard about Ingersoll or any of the other freethinkers. Even people in the audience who I know for a fact are religious and conservative found the history of Freethought fascinating and kept coming back for each episode.

TS: Besides being an atheist, I suspect you would describe yourself as a secular humanist? How would you summarize your philosophy about life?

BRIGIT: My whole reason for living is to do good. My religion is to do good which is similar to Thomas Paine's philosophy. "It's more shameful to distrust your friends than to be deceived by them." is one of my favorite maxims. I love to be free and open. "Courage is more exhilarating than fear." We don't need something up in the sky. We need each other. But above all else, I'm a proud American Atheist. 

To contact Brigit Clarke-Smith, email her at paidbcs@lcglen.com.

**Soroptimist is a global women's organization whose members volunteer to improve the lives of women and girls through programs leading to social and economic empowerment. The name, Soroptimist, means "best for women," and that's what the organization strives to achieve. For more information, visit <http://www.soroptimist.org/>*

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IS THE TURK MUCH WORSE THAN THE CHRISTIAN?

TO OUR FRIENDS:

Don't you know some Freethinker who does not now, but who would subscribe to THE TRUTH SEEKER if YOU called his attention to the Paper?

The timeless words from Lizzie were, “That woman was as pure as God’s snow and as chaste as His ice.” Lizzie S. Decker died two years later and was buried alongside Ida. No one has been buried in the family plot after Lizzie.

On December 19, 1902, two months after Ida’s suicide, Herman Helcher shot Voltairine de Cleyre three times as she waited for a trolley car, very nearly killing her. This was a critical event in the story of anarchism in Philadelphia. Herman was a former language student of hers and an anarchist who had lost his sanity from a fever around 1895. All that was known of Herman’s origins until 2013 was that he was a Jewish immigrant from Russia; but since then I have been contacted by a living relative, and now we have a fair picture of his whole life.

Herman was actually Chaim Helcher, born at Daugavpils, Latvia and had come to the United States with his mother and his sister around 1888.

By 1902, Voltairine was already fairly well-known in the international movement for her many essays and poems that had been published in anarchist and other radical periodicals. Locally, she was one of the two best-known anarchist speakers of English, along with George Brown.

Herman stood waiting, wearing a false moustache and eyeglasses. When he was arrested, he told the police, “I don’t want to live. We were sweethearts. She broke my heart and deserved to be killed.” Voltairine was helped by strangers and taken by horse-drawn police wagon to Hahnemann, a Homeopathic hospital. The doctors quickly declared the bleeding anarchist lady doomed, but then her friends began to arrive. George was first, and he insisted that no expense be spared in saving Voltairine, because she was very special.



Left DR. WILLIAM WILLIAMS KEEN JR. (1837-1932)

Below CATHERINE BRESHKOYSKAYA, (1844-1934)



News of the shooting traveled very fast, and this is where the world of anarchist doctors steps into the light. The following day, the *North American* reported that Dr. William Williams Keen stopped in to look de Cleyre over and offer an opinion. Dr. William Williams Keen, Jr. (1837-1932) was one of the top surgeons on earth and he was in no way associated with Hahneman Hospital. The patient was poor, and the nation had not forgotten that its president had been assassinated by an anarchist only one year earlier. This famous surgeon’s presence and free advice would seem downright bizarre.

It turns out that Doctors Leo N. Gartman and Bernhard Segal, anarchist comrades of Voltairine’s, had been a students of Keen’s just eight years earlier at Thomas Jefferson Hospital, and both were now respected physicians. Her connections behind the scenes brought the “fair anarchist poet” back from death’s door.

Herman Helcher was brought in by police to be identified by his victim, but de Cleyre flatly refused to finger him, insisting that he needed care, not punishment. Helcher was quite mad, and we find a dozen different reports on his delusions of love and obsessions with various women.

Money was raised for Voltairine’s recovery and also for Herman’s legal defense. This rare level of forgiveness and charity in the week before Christmas won sympathy for de Cleyre throughout the country, but Herman was sentenced to six years of prison and spent the remaining decade of his life between mental hospitals, jails, and the care of his family. Voltairine carried all three bullets in her body for the rest of her life because her homeopathic doctors chose to leave them there.

Voltairine de Cleyre had yet another close call with death, this time by syphilis, during the winter of 1904-1905. In those times, the word *syphilis* was never used outside of medical literature and if it was publicly connected to an individual, it would constitute a social death. Voltairine was a *varietist*, or serial monogamist, and sexually active since her early twenties. She was not especially promiscuous as far as we know, but more than enough to be regarded as “a public whore” by “some of the good women” of Arden, Delaware’s single-tax and socialist circles.

In the years after her death it was understood among de Cleyre’s friends that she suffered from the disease, but it remained only a strong rumor until recently, when I found proof. Since childhood she suffered from painful sinus infections and “catarrh of the nose” that had by 1904 created a terribly pounding in her ears and caused the roof of her mouth to atrophy. It was so bad that she spent July in hospital, then two months in the country, away from all the city’s noise and pollution. Finding no relief, Voltairine returned in October for a stay in Medico-Chirurgical Hospital at 17th and Cherry

Streets. Her condition worsened to the point where the *Lucifer* periodical posted premature obituary on the 27th and her friends again formed a committee to raise funds for her treatment and support. Sometimes she suffered deafness.

Voltairine, however, was not one to give up the struggle just because she was in continuous pain and could hardly speak or write. On Christmas Day of 1904, the Russian revolutionary exile Catherine Breshkovskaya made her second of six public fund-raising events at a theater seventeen blocks from her sick bed during a heavy blizzard. Because the insurrection against the Tzar was the most exciting news to develop during her lifetime, Voltairine walked through the snow and was able to exchange greetings with the old fighter. Some of her comrades who were born in the Russian Empire were hosting the *Babushka* (little granny) in their “co-operative” house (a radical thing then, shared by unmarried couples), and Natasha Notkin, a Lithuanian-born nihilist and free lover, had started the city’s Friends of Russian Freedom group. The *Babushka*’s events drew wild, overflowing crowds. Recently, I learned that a Tzar’s spy sent by *Okhrana* (intelligence force) dispatched an agent named Movsa Tumarinson to live briefly on Pine Street (close to many anarchists) that winter, posing as a dentist—and leaving a woman pregnant before he vanished.

Voltairine left the hospital in January 1905, but she had not yet recovered to robust health. On March fifth, Breshkovskaya made her fourth appearance in Philadelphia, with Alice Stone Blackwell presiding, and featuring speakers in several languages. The English address was given by Rev. Russell H. Conwell, the city’s leading Baptist and founder of Temple University. Conwell gave the US constitution as the model for reform in Russia and stated that Breshkovskaya “has found here a land where, with her ideals of freedom, she will be perfectly at home.”

At this time, Voltairine de Cleyre, although not scheduled to speak, asked to do so, and was granted the podium. The next day’s press stated that “she was pale and ill, but her voice rang like a tocsin and her utterances aroused great enthusiasm.”

Voltairine began,

Not as an American—though I am one—but as an anarchist, I welcome this noble woman to our ranks. I could not sit still and be silent hearing the truth told in every language but English. The international character of this meeting is a sign that people of all countries, whether in Italy, Russia, or America. But if I could not wish the Russian revolutionaries a better freedom than that which we have in America, I would say to them, ‘You had better lay down your arms.’

Madame Breshkovskaya, who has struggled so long for the freedom of her country, wishes to struggle till the end of her days and I hope that some little remnant of her spirit will remain with us so that we, too may accomplish our freedom—the freedom to speak and act, not the freedom to starve in the streets. Then we may talk about American liberty, not before!

De Cleyre most likely remembered that less than four years earlier when President McKinley was killed by a self-professed anarchist, Rev. Dr. Conwell had been one of the more extreme reactionaries when he declared in his Sunday sermon on September 16, 1901 that “a man who does not believe in our government is a tyrant to be destroyed by assassination, and has no right to be here... The very fact that he believes it is his duty to murder is sufficient evidence of his being a human tiger who has no right to live.”

The hardcore radicals present loved what Voltairine had done. She had set the idea of freedom straight and thrown the pompous hater of anarchists back in his box. But according to the press reporter, Blackwell and the other middle class persons showed “great dissatisfaction,” and so did the *Babushka* herself.

In 2013, I was asked by a linguist named Kathy Ferguson to read the story that I suspect may be by Voltairine de Cleyre. It is in *Mother Earth* vol. 1, no 8 (October 1906). It is unsigned and called “Between The Living And The Dead.” This was an early issue of the leading anarchist journal in North America, and one of the best that has ever been published. However, no one seems ever to have reprinted it or commented on it. Kathy was examining the style and editing practices of the publication.

As I began reading the piece (either for the first time or the first in around 25 years), it felt like the hairs on my head were standing on end. It begins:

We were three—a man, a child, and I who am a woman. It was in the winter and the man sat always at the front window of the third story opposite me, and the child in the parlor two stories below; and I from my second story saw them both. If they saw me, or seeing noticed me, I do not know, but I think they did: for we were kin, and the only kin in all that life that hurried round us, up and down, up and down. Ah, the long agony of those endless days, while we stayed watching the snow floating in the merciless atmosphere and the living people going up and down—we the unburied dead who from our coffin windows looked out!

That’s her, I thought. I was already dead certain, because of the writing style. Then I started to consider when this was written, which is about eighteen months after Voltairine was confined in Medico-Chirurgical Hospital.

And the child, ah well, the child with her ghastly face and sullen blue eyes, stared outward at the snow and the life that was all denied her; —such a young child, with the glory of youth still shining in her mass of pale hair.

Voltairine spilled a lot of dark ink about starving, filthy children. I knew this one wasn’t headed for the Ivy League. A little further on,

Ah, they too must die soon. The woman who sweeps the pavement there, impatient of the falling snow, she too must suffer; yet a little while she too must suffer and die. One day she will go in and close the door behind her, and never come out again. Those men who tramp so lustily, forcing back the cold and the snow with their hot hearts and limbs, they are tramping straight towards it, that last door which will open to them the fore-halls of death, wherein they, too, must sit unburied—long perhaps, like us. Ah, what is the use of it all? Why go up and down so? Why wait so long since the end is the same? Why not make an end? Why not make an end?

Suicidal thinking. De Cleyre tried to kill herself at least twice.

And the great hammer that beat in my head, the merciless hammer that rang like iron, began to clang: “And the sins....of the fathers....shall be visited....upon the children....unto the third....and the fourth....generation....And the sins....of the fathers....” I pressed my ears between my hands, but the hammer clanged on—“unto the third....and the fourth....generation.”

Not that I was not already sure, but this is exactly the way Voltairine described her frequent migraines to her close friend Nathan Navro, as he wrote in an unpublished manuscript in the Joseph Ishill papers at Harvard. But “the sins of the fathers” is a time-worn code for venereal disease. If this were standing alone it would make me sure that she was the author, and it seals the matter of whether or not Voltairine suffered from syphilis. Further along,

Under the hammer-clang repeating the pitiless law, my head reeled to and fro: “Oh Life, Life, where will you make it up to her? Why was the dream of justice ever born in the human mind, if it must stand dumb before this terrible child?” And far away there stretched before my eyes the limitless procession of little lives that had come forth in waste and blight, to die in their smitten youth, bearing through all their pain in the unnameable grace of babyhood, the aroma of green tendrils, the gloss of the down of childhood shining and floating still among the dust and death. Oh, that girl’s long golden hair! How thick and fair it gleams around the waxy face! And the little starved kitten in the alleyway with its delicate paws catching at a wind-blown straw! GOD? Did men ever believe a God could so order life? Did anyone ever believe it?

Voltairine, the burned-out, forty-year-old social activist (which she was). Voltairine, the atheist!

We have gone from each other now. Somehow the door of my coffin reopened, and I came back to the living. The man passed down to the dead. Of his will he went. It happened so: on a day of thunder he leaned out and measured with his eyes for the last time; then he looked back into the room; no one was there. He set the geranium carefully at the side of the window-sill, and plunged to the stone below—the kind, hard stone that was merciful to him.

As in Voltairine’s life, the narrator recovers and left the hospital. The man jumping to his sad end is her usual gloomy scene, again in suicidal language. Farther down, the story ends,

Locked within the fatal narrowing circle, her soul is freezing while her body rots. Powerless in its martyrdom it waits the final expiation, hidden and dark, like an eye seen dull blue under a lid that has never unclosed. Powerless, non-understanding....—“For the sin....of the father....has been visited....upon the child....” And there is no Justice anywhere, NOT ANYWHERE.

Yes, that’s Voltairine de Cleyre all right. I’m so happy to have discovered this lost gem of hers, hidden in plain sight for over a century. She could be the gloomiest person, and it’s no surprise she laid the despair on thickly, given the subject. This was de Cleyre’s agonized and deliberate statement to herself on a curse that she bore but could never discuss openly.

After reading the story and recognizing its authorship with the collaboration of Kathy Ferguson, the last and indisputable proof followed the end of the text, and for a little while, I was the only person on this wide earth who could see it. I can hardly explain how much I enjoy moments like this.

Mother Earth, like many periodicals of its time, used random objects like a potted plant or a bird, or some symmetrical

design that marked the place on a page where one piece ended and the next began. The object following “Between The Living And The Dead” is not a bird or a plant, nor is it symmetrical, and it floats in what would seem a needlessly large empty space on the page. Plenty of text could have fit there, but only the emblem is there.

Voltairine de Cleyre initialed the story, and put a pineapple on top. An upper case V lies on its back, then a lower case d stands upright, then an upper case C lies forward on its face. *VdC!* The sly monogram is what amazed me the most. I think it tells us that the story’s authorship was not a true secret, but known to all those “in the know.” So many things in life

This was de Cleyre’s agonized and deliberate statement to herself on a curse that she bore but could never discuss openly.

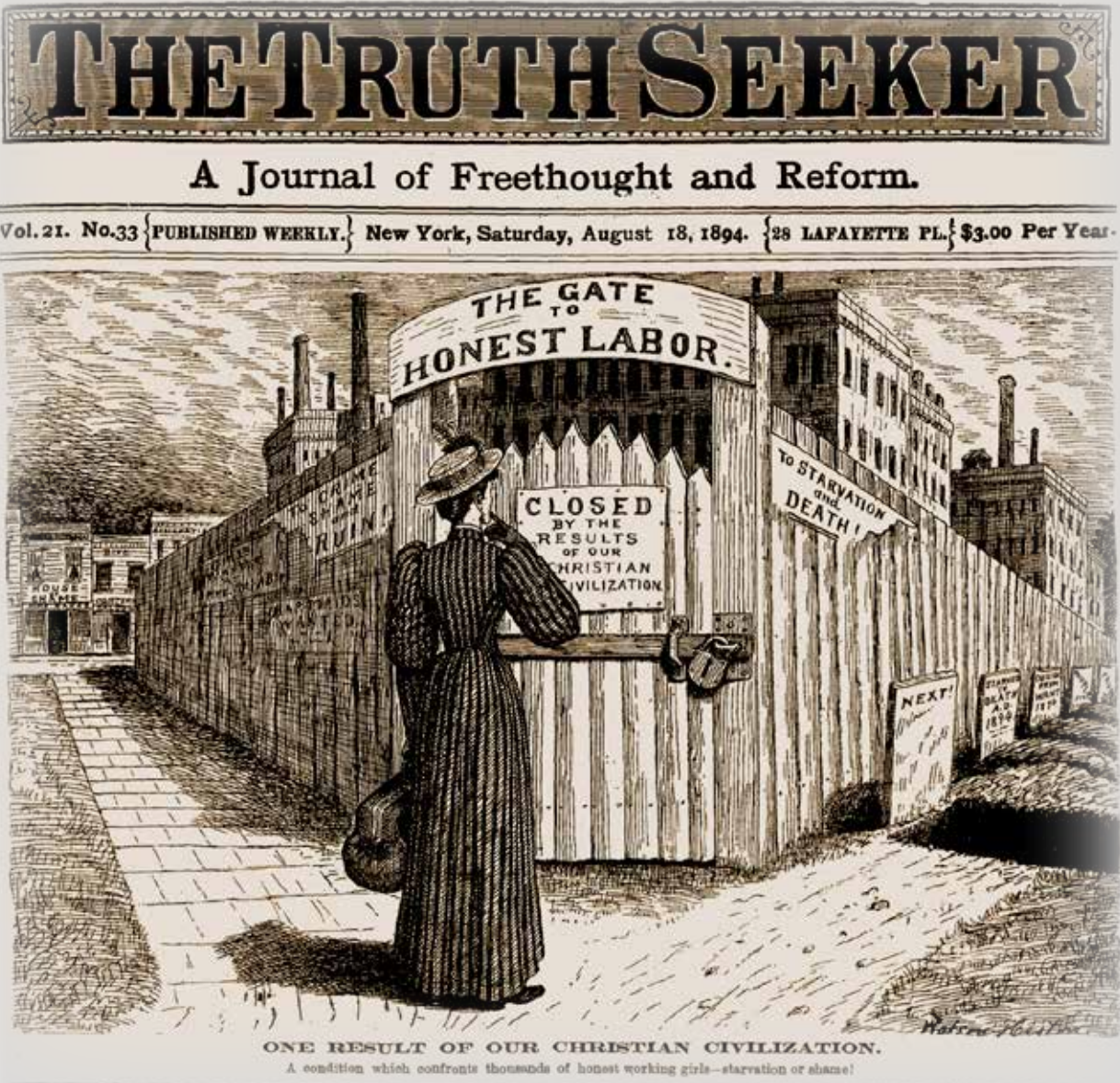
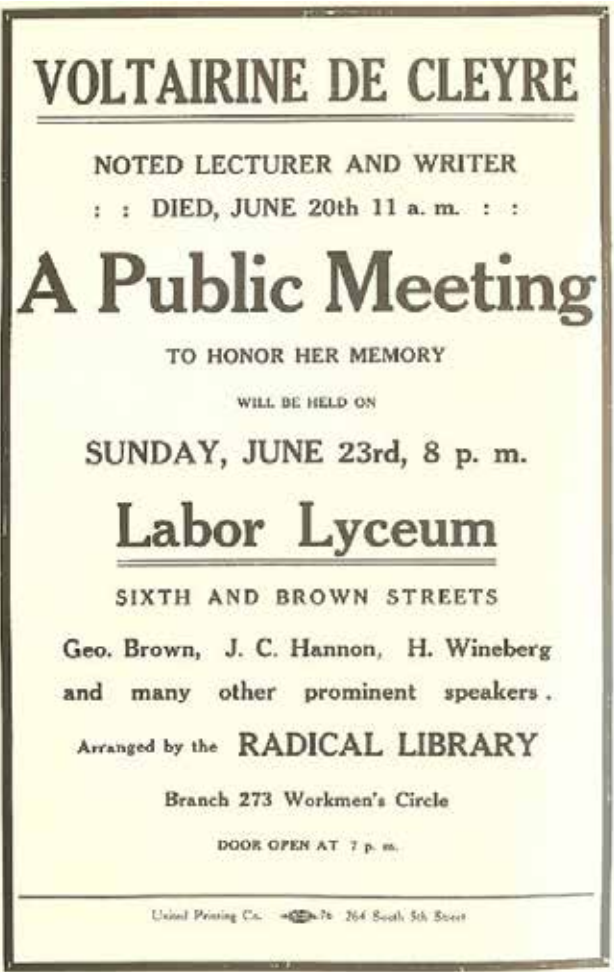
are either spotted or missed, depending on whether one has the right radar. Anarchism itself is like that.



ROBERT P. HELMS is an independent historian, presently working on a book on the early anarchists of Philadelphia, where he lives. He has published many articles on anarchism, and edited and was principle author of *Guinea Pig Zero: An Anthology of the Journal for Human Research Subjects* (New Orleans 2002), and editor and annotator of *Forty Years In The Struggle: The Memoirs of a Jewish Anarchist* by Chaim Leib Weinberg (Duluth, MN 2007). He is the editor and compiler of *Inspired Prophet Of Liberty: Hugh O. Pentecost’s Addresses to The Unity Congregation, 1888-1891* (Philadelphia 2016, forthcoming). He wrote *George Brown, the Cobbler Anarchist of Philadelphia* (London and Berkeley CA, 2006). Visit his website <http://deadanarchists.org/>.

Opposite page POSTER PROMOTING A MEMORIAL SERVICE HELD A FEW DAYS AFTER DE CLEYRE’S DEATH.

Below EDITORIAL CARTOON BY WATSON HESTON ON FRONT PAGE OF THE TRUTH SEEKER, AUGUST 18, 1894



(TRINITY continued from page 35)

The woman who initially provided the bail for Josephine Tilton had a change of heart after she read *Cupid's Yokes*. Tilton, however, was more than willing to go to jail, proclaiming her right to sell the booklet. She had taken six hundred copies of *Cupid's Yokes* to the convention and ended up selling them all. Tilton later said that because of the arrest publicity, she could have sold the fifteen-cent pamphlet for a dollar. (A fourth individual was also arrested for selling *Cupid's Yokes*. He was a Watkins Glen resident who, while walking among the crowd with about fifty copies for sale, was marched off to jail after offering the pamphlet to the local district attorney!)

On Monday, August 26, the Schuyler County grand jury convened and Judge Oliver Hurd instructed the members "with unusual severity to find" that the pamphlet was obscene. But after reading *Cupid's Yokes*, certain members found that it was not obscene. Nevertheless, Reverend Waldo of the local Presbyterian Church conferred with the district attorney and convinced the members of the grand jury to indict the four. On Thursday at 2 pm, the defendants were formally indicted, and a portion of the indictment read:

"The jurors of the People...present that D.M. Bennett being of the age of twenty-one years and over and being a person of a wicked and depraved mind and disposition, and most unlawfully, wickedly and feloniously devising, contriving, and intending to vitiate and corrupt the morals of the people

**I am proud
to stand bail
for the editor
of *The Truth
Seeker*.**

—Amy Post

Below

Left ELLA GIBSON
(1821–1901);

Center DRESS
REFORMER DR.
MARY WALKER (1832–
1919), A CIVIL WAR
VETERAN AWARDED
A BRONZE STAR .
OCCASIONALLY, DR.
WALKER AND MARY
TILLOTSON VISITED
THE TRUTH SEEKER
OFFICE WEARING
BLOOMERS, RISKING
ARREST AND
RIDICULE;

Right AMY POST
(1802–1889)

of the State of New York and to bring them into a state of wickedness, lewdness, and debauchery, etc."

D.M. Bennett commented on the formidable accusation and wondered why "and instigated by the devil" had not been included in the complaint. "Then," he said, "it could have been made clear how we came to be so wicked."

The defendants, with the exception of Josephine Tilton, made bail and a court date was set for December 9, 1878. Tilton refused bail and Bennett reported, with a "spirit of noble bravery and independence, she proudly and fearlessly marched out of the Court House," surrendered to the sheriff and was taken to prison where she was willing to stay until trial. One of Tilton's distinguished visitors in the Schuyler County jail was National Defense Association chairman, Theron Leland, a pioneer stenographer who recorded his visit:

I found her serene and happy, and as determined as ever to rent her room by the quarter and board by the season on the bounty of the Watkins' people. Her street shoes had been buried at the bottom of her baggage, and her bonnet wrapped up and stowed away, not needed for immediate use. The Sheriff had promised to have her little room furnished and whitewashed, and she planted herself down for a three-month siege, awaiting trial . . . her friends as well as her enemies admired her grit and energy, but thought she was carrying her 'spunk' too far.

Theron Leland persuaded Tilton to accept the \$500 bail and reported that "the fruits and flowers that had been sent in to her were distributed among the prisoners left behind, with whom she had established herself as a friend and favorite, good-byes were said, and we all left the lock-up."

In a letter to D.M. Bennett from Dedham Jail in Massachusetts, *Cupid's Yokes* author Ezra Heywood wrote, "You [Bennett] have faced the music with intrepid heroism. . . . Your bold and timely move will help to settle this great question once and forever." Heywood also expressed his admiration for his courageous sister-in-law. "Josephine's brave demeanor at Watkins reminded me of Joan of Arc . . . and several other 'good girls.'" Bennett echoed Heywood's sentiments, writing, "We felt proud of such a compatriot in the toils of Christian persecution. All honor to Josephine S. Tilton."

Finally on Thursday, after a week of waiting, the four were formally charged. At the indictment on August 29, Judge Hurd read the 1873 statute and commented on the pamphlet, "I have read the book and in my opinion it is an obscene work and contraband of the statute." The judge went on to discuss Ezra Heywood's conviction and imprisonment and was, in Bennett's view, prejudging the case.

Apparently the Watkins Glen authorities were unaware or decided to ignore the old admonition: "Never pick a fight with people who buy ink by the barrel." Because in 1878, the *Truth Seeker* was a 16-page weekly and advertised as the largest free-thought paper in the world. And when the elderly

**We felt proud
of such a
compatriot
in the toils
of Christian
persecution.
All honor to
Josephine S.
Tilton**

—D.M. Bennett

Below

Theron C. Leland
(1821–1885);

Albert Leighton
Rawson (1829–1902)

editor returned to New York City, he began an all-out assault on the town of Watkins Glen, its leading citizens, and the culprit that he believed instigated the arrest, Anthony Comstock. And he informed readers that he would continue to challenge the Comstock Law and sell *Cupid's Yokes*.

In the *Truth Seeker*, Bennett denounced Warren Hurd (the Judge's brother) in an article titled "Which Is the Greater Criminal?" He also identified and rebuked the men he felt were responsible for the arrest in "The Very Moral Men Who Caused Our Arrest." Bennett began by chiding the leading citizens of Watkins Glen who disparaged the freethinkers prior to the convention. He scolded Frederick Davis, the leading man in making the complaint, who happened to also be the head of the local Episcopal Church. Bennett exposed several examples of hypocrisy by some of the town's leading citizens:

He [Davis] is by no means of a paragon of virtue and sobriety. He conducts a malt house, and changes the grain, adapted to the healthful food of men and animals, to a condition suited to the preparation of an alcoholic beverage that deprives his fellow-men of their reason and self-control. On occasions of picnics and parties he had been in the habit of getting grossly intoxicated and making a fool of himself generally. He has, we are informed, a reputation of being quite a ladies' man. He had two or three upon the string at the time his late wife died, and conversation was held in her presence



in reference to them the day before she died, which annoyed her exceedingly and embittered the hours of her death. One of these ladies he subsequently took for his wife.

The editor also exposed a member of the grand jury who “tried to screen his son from due punishment when he exhibited himself in a state of utter nudity in the streets of Watkins.” A week later he linked all of his enemies:

We have received pretty direct information, which we deem authentic, that it was Anthony Comstock who instigated our arrest at Watkins. It would seem that our suspicions that he had written the Young Men’s Christian Association at Watkins how to proceed in the matter were correct. If this information is true, we have again to thank his pious character for another arrest by the powers of the orthodox church. Frederick Davis, Dr. Thompson, Rev. Mr. Waldo, Warren Hurd, and his brother Judge Hurd, ought to feel very proud to thus be the tools and dupes in carrying out the instructions of this execrable character.

The 1878 New York State Freethinkers’ Association convention evolved into a ten-day legal debacle for D.M. Bennett. After making bail on Friday, August 30, he left Watkins for Rochester where he briefly visited his mother and sister who had already heard of his second arrest. In a personal letter written that day to Josephine Tilton, the editor recounted their celebrated arrest at Watkins and the

Few of the martyrs of the cause of human liberty have evinced grander traits of character. May I long be worthy of such compatriots.

—D.M. Bennett

ensuing legal proceedings. “Few of the martyrs of the cause of human liberty have evinced grander traits of character,” Bennett declared. “May I long be worthy of such compatriots.”

In December, D.M. Bennett, accompanied by Josephine Tilton, took the train to Watkins Glen for their trial scheduled for December 17, 1878. After waiting nearly three days for their case to be heard, they learned that the judge changed the venue to the Court of Sessions. The defendants were required to furnish new bail and their trial was rescheduled for February.

While D.M. Bennett was still in Watkins Glen, Ezra Heywood was pardoned by President Rutherford B. Hayes and he was a free man on December 19. The long-awaited pardon was *unconditional*. The specific reasons Hayes gave for his decision were the “great number of Massachusetts citizens seeking Heywood’s release and that Heywood’s health was suffering.” President Hayes wrote, “I entertain as little doubt as those who assail me” that Heywood was wrong about marriage. But, he added, “It is no crime by the laws of the United States to advocate the abolition of marriage.”

POSTSCRIPT

The Watkins Glen case never went to trial. D.M. Bennett, however, was subsequently arrested a third time a few months later in New York City for mailing *Cupid’s Yokes* to Anthony Comstock and was convicted and sentenced to 13-months at hard labor in the Albany Penitentiary.

Opposite

NATIONAL DEFENSE ASSOCIATION PETITION OPPOSING THE COMSTOCK LAW. SIGNED BY ALBERT L. RAWSON AND SENT TO SAMUEL SULLIVAN “SUNSET” COX, THE CONGRESSMAN WHO REPRESENTED BOTH OHIO AND NEW YORK IN THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. THE PETITION, DATED MARCH 18, 1879, WAS THE FIRST DAY OF D.M. BENNETT’S NEW YORK OBSCENITY TRIAL FOR MAILING EZRA HEYWOOD’S *CUPID’S YOKES* PAMPHLET. THE PETITION HAD 70,000 SIGNATURES ASKING FOR REPEAL OR MODIFICATION OF THE 1873 OBSCENITY STATUTE KNOWN AS THE COMSTOCK LAW.

Left

NATIONAL DEFENSE ASSOCIATION SECRETARY DR. E.B. FOOTE, JR. AND HIS FATHER WERE PIONEER BIRTH CONTROL ADVOCATES. HIS FATHER INVENTED THE FIRST CERVICAL CAP AND DR. FOOTE, JR. COINED THE TERM “CONTRACEPTION.” THE TWO DOCTORS WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR THE BIRTH CONTROL MOVEMENT IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES, RECORDS OF THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. [HTTP://RECORDSOFRIGHTS.ORG](http://RECORDSOFRIGHTS.ORG)



National Defense Association.

A. L. RAWSON, D.D., LL.D., President.
JOHN P. JEWETT, Vice-President.
E. B. FOOTE, Jr., M.D., Sec., 120 Lexington Avenue, New York.
G. L. HENDERSON, Treas., 111 Elyse Street, New York.
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
HUGH HYSON BROWN, CHAS. WINTERBURN, M.D., WILSON McDONALD, LEON COOMAN,
T. C. LELAND, Chairman, 301 East 73rd Street, New York.



New York, March 18th 1879

Hon. S.S. Cox,

Sir: I hand you herewith a blank form of the petition, signed by 70,000 citizens, praying for the repeal or modification of the U. S. Postal Law of 1873, commonly called "the Comstock Law." The petition was presented by Gen. B. F. Butler, was referred to the Committee on Judiciary, and reported adversely by them, and now lies on the table. There has never been any action in the House on that petition, and my object is to ask you to call the matter up for such action or re-commitment as the case may demand.

I understand that statements were made by Mr. Anthony Comstock before the Committee on Judiciary to the effect that many names on the petition were forgeries. To answer that charge I hand you the affidavits of E. B. Foote, M.D., Editor of the "Health Monthly," of D. M. Bennett, Editor of the "Truth Seeker," and of others, H. W. Mercer, J. M. Miller, Mayor, W. R. Shriver, Clerk of the Court, C. C. Goodale, Co. Auditor, M. A. Knight, Co. Treasurer, D. C. Ratcliff, Sheriff, all of Madison County, Iowa, who gathered 1071 names, and of David Jenkins of Hannibal, Mo., who gathered 700 to 1000 names, and of William F. Washley of Mount Pleasant, Pa., who collected 420 names. Many others might be sent you, but these may be taken as samples. And I also say that many of the signed petitions were addressed to my care, and were handed over to the care of Mr. Bennett who made up the whole into one roll. I gathered several hundred names in this city, nearly every signer of whom was personally known to me, and signed in my presence.

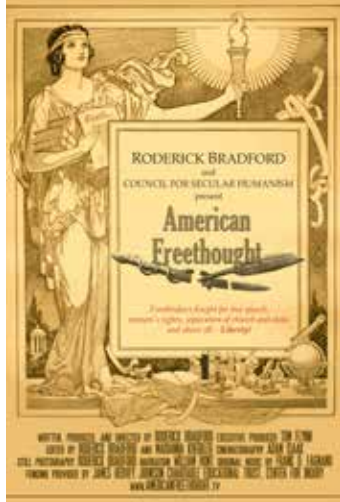
If it is deemed advisable, this Association will send some one to Washington who will give you further information or whatever aid you may wish in this matter.

I addressed a note to you at your residence in this city, and received from Mrs. S. S. Cox for answer that you were in Washington.

Yours Respectfully
A. L. Rawson
Pres. N. D. A.

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D.M. Bennett: The Truth Seeker

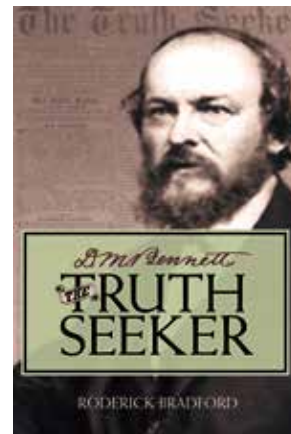
THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE FOUNDER OF *THE TRUTH SEEKER*

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October 5, 2014

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The first issue of your publication is beautifully designed, excellently edited and interesting from cover to cover.

Keep it up, with appreciation always.

— Gay Talese

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Mary Wicks Bennett

1819–1898



D.M. Bennett affectionately referred to Mary as his better half. Only months before his death, he expressed his gratitude to her in the *Truth Seeker*: "More than words of thanks are due to my faithful wife who has remained at home during my long absence and every day applied herself to the interests of our cause."

In 1883, less than a year after Bennett's death, Mary decided to sell the *Truth Seeker* to Eugene Macdonald. "I have not lost one iota of love for the cause," she informed the readers of the weekly, "and were it not for my infirmities—I would stand at the helm as long as life lasts."

A few years later, abolitionist and freethought activist Lucy Colman visited Mrs. Bennett, who was still living alone in the same rooms where her beloved husband had died. Mary looked very well, Colman thought, and that she appeared even more beautiful than the last time she saw her. The widow, Colman observed, was surrounded by the beautiful gifts her deceased husband brought her from India and other exotic places that he visited during his travels around the world. She described Mary as having what was known as a "spiritual expression." Mary expressed her belief that her husband was still with her. "He was the love of my girlhood, the dear husband of my matured womanhood," she confided to Colman. "And that he was murdered, just as we were nearing age 'tis so hard to think of . . . and that professed Liberals helped to make his death martyrdom—is the worst of all to bear."

Mary spent her final days living at the home of Eugene Macdonald, whom she had been like a mother to since he was a young man. Mary Wicks Bennett died on July 31, 1898, only one month before the *Truth Seeker's* twenty-fifth anniversary. Freethought activist and D.M. Bennett's attorney T. B. Wakeman gave the address at her funeral, as he had done at her husband's sixteen years earlier. Wakeman concluded his eloquent remarks with his reading of Ethical Culture movement founder Felix Adler's poem "The City of Light."

Mary Wicks Bennett's ashes rest beside her husband in the shadow of the D.M. Bennett Monument in Brooklyn, New York's historic Green-Wood cemetery. Her obituary acknowledged that Mary—like her husband—had left the creeds of the Christian religion in the past:

She had listened somewhat to the doctrine of Spiritualism, and had shown a passing interest in that philosophy as modified by theosophy, but to her these were speculations and not facts, and while at times she expressed a hope that they were true, her hope did not amount to confidence, and the whole subject was displaced in her mind by what she regarded as the most important matters of this world. . . . She was his adviser and helpmate, and when it came to the founding of this paper, it was she who chose its name—*The Truth Seeker*.



