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### Resolution

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#### 1

During Alice Freeman Palmer's last months at the University of Chicago, the Palmers found themselves thinking of their coming European sabbatical. George wrote on one occasion: "And to Europe I find myself looking forward more and more. . . . Can you and I only lie once more in a Venetian chamber alone and hear the water lapping, Harper's smiles or frowns will count for little." [1](#) And before long they were doing just that. With Chicago finally behind her, the Palmers sailed August 17, 1895, for Boulogne on the *Maasdam*, which they thought cheaper and cleaner than the Cunard liners. [2](#) Both were weary. The last few years had been strenuous and demanding.

They rode bicycles through the countryside of Normandy and Brittany during the fine September weather. [3](#) The bicycle as a form of transportation truly liberated its users. It did not, like a horse, have to be fed, housed, or harnessed and was always ready to go. George had succumbed to the bicycle craze in 1892 and had used his wheel as his major transport for two years. Alice was a novice who had sat on a bicycle only three times when they set out on this ambitious adventure. Her legs were stiff the first days and they made way slowly, taking time to inspect Norman churches, ruins, and old villages. [4](#)

When they reached Paris and met up with their trunks which they had sent on ahead, they began housekeeping in the same apartment where they had lived seven years before. As Alice said, "It is all like a fairy story." [5](#) They read and wrote mornings, visited churches, museums, and galleries in the afternoons. They had three bedrooms so the Herricks, who were also in Europe and whose traveling was partly financed by the Palmers, joined them for awhile in Paris. In December they sought the sun in the south of France. They spent part of March in Florence, then went on for six weeks to their beloved Venice, "the one spot in Europe which best met Mrs. Palmer's ideas of Paradise." [6](#) During the late spring and early summer they visited Vienna, Germany, and England before returning to Cambridge for the fall term. [7](#)

All this time the bicycles went with them. They not only bicycled in Normandy and Brittany, but in Picardy and Provence. They rode the Corniche Road from Frejus to Alassio and over 300 miles between Venice and Vienna, most of it mountainous. Their bicycles took them through the Black Forest from Tübingen to Freiburg and for shorter excursions in the Midlands. At the end of the year their cyclometers registered 1,500 miles, quite a feat for a middle-aged academic couple. [8](#) George wrote of Alice on a bicycle.

At the call of the white road she felt all ties to be cut. . . . She could turn to the right or left, could feel the down-pressed pedal and the rushing air, could lie in the shade by the roadside, visit a castle, dally long at luncheon, gather grapes or

blackberries from the field, stop at whatever small inn might attract at night, and for days together commune rather with nature than with man." [9](#)

No better description of the 1890s New Woman could be found anywhere.

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## 2

After this joyous vacation, Alice Freeman Palmer settled more comfortably into a routine of influence "without portfolio" in the arena of women's education. Everyone expected her to have time for new chores. As she wrote Robert Herrick, " `Being a person of leisure, now that you do not go to Chicago--you can surely do this,' comes several times a day." [10](#) The women's colleges, especially Wellesley, continued to need her careful attention. Four more years would pass before she could turn Wellesley College over to a leader that she really trusted. Meanwhile her guiding hand was needed on campus and in the board room. The affiliated colleges, Radcliffe and Barnard, experienced their most acute need for attention during this period. The problems confronting the State Board of Education and Massachusetts facilities for training teachers were as challenging as ever. She resumed a demanding lecture schedule.

When she returned from Europe in 1896, Alice Freeman Palmer's role as Wellesley College's powerful, guiding trustee became central to her life. She lent strong encouragement to President Irvine who was engaged in a fierce battle with the old guard to further professionalize the faculty, upgrade the curriculum, and soften the sharp evangelical edge of college life. Pauline Durant wanted none of these changes, and her vote and that of Alice Palmer in trustees meetings usually fell on opposite sides of any question.

For one thing, the old religious taboos began to crumble. The library was opened on Sundays. A Roman Catholic was hired to teach French. Palmer supported both innovations. Predictably Mrs. Durant was opposed. [11](#) In 1897 the fight focused on hiring a Catholic to train the choral class in the Beethoven Society. This time Mrs. Durant brought up her heavy artillery. The evangelist Dwight Moody was a perennial member, but seldom attender, of the trustees. Alice wrote George: "Mrs. Durant sent for Mr. Moody. He came and gave us nothing less than a blowing up--he called it a protest, said we were drifting and would turn the whole college over to the Catholics." [12](#) Julia Irvine was angry and said some unwise and bitter things. This time the vote went against those committed to change.

However, change was inevitable. Domestic work was abolished and tuition raised over Mrs. Durant's objections. [13](#) The purge of faculty continued with Palmer's support, reflecting the generally improved standards in women's higher education in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Culling and weeding poorly trained teachers was not accomplished without bitter fights in which Palmer, although advocating and sometimes initiating the changes, usually tried to play a conciliatory role. It was she who worked out the terms of Frances Lord's particularly acrimonious termination to permit her to retire with dignity on a reasonable pension, [14](#) as well as the easing of Anne Morgan from philosophy. [15](#) Palmer also took the lead in eliminating from the college's offerings unnecessary departments like philology and nonfunctioning programs like a Ph.D. which had never been a realistic possibility. [16](#) She also sponsored the new course

offerings proposed by the faculty, the adjusting of faculty salaries upward, and the elimination of the requirement that faculty live in college. [17](#) She was fully behind the faculty's drive for autonomy and professionalization.

Palmer's greatest gift to Wellesley, however, was persuading Caroline Hazard to succeed Julia Irvine as president in 1899. Irvine had made attempts to resign as early as 1897. The constant conflict that accompanied change exhausted her physical and emotional resources. More importantly, she seemed unable to put the college on a firm financial footing. By 1896 the college debt was over \$100,000, and the college continued to experience an annual net loss of about \$10,000 throughout the decade. [18](#) Irvine did not see herself as a money-raiser and Pauline Durant's capital was long since depleted. Faculty salaries needed adjustment. Raising tuition was only a partial solution. Irvine felt she could no longer continue, and a search committee for a new president was appointed in February of 1898 with Palmer a member. [19](#)

It is possible Palmer at first favored calling a man, but Mrs. Durant argued, probably rightly, that appointing a man at this juncture would forever close the post to women. [20](#) Mary E. Woolley, the young woman shortly to become president of Mount Holyoke College but then on the Wellesley faculty, was high on Palmer's list of suitable candidates. However, Caroline Hazard was Palmer's final choice and accepted the appointment in the spring of 1899. [21](#) No longer was Alice Freeman Palmer to guide the college. Wellesley again had an autonomous policy-maker at its head.

Hazard was the daughter of a wealthy Rhode Island mill owner with a fortune of her own. This contrasted with the middle-class professionals who had headed the college since 1881. [22](#) She had been educated privately, had no college degrees, and no administrative experience, but she took charge, obviously with Alice Palmer's blessing, from the beginning. Under Irvine the executive committee had dealt in great detail with faculty appointments and salaries, curriculum and graduation requirements. When Hazard became president meetings were less frequent, shorter, and largely concerned with business and financial matters. [23](#)

Hazard knew well the nineteenth century's millionaire entrepreneurs who found in educational philanthropy a worthy use for their expanding fortunes. She made use of her acquaintance to solve Wellesley's financial problems. Her brother, Rowland G. Hazard, joined the trustees in 1899, and it was his good offices that resulted the next year in John D. Rockefeller offering the college an endowment of \$100,000 if the existing indebtedness could be retired by commencement 1900. [24](#) Several younger faculty, including the Palmers' old friend and protégé Vida Scudder, strongly opposed accepting "tainted" Standard Oil money. The source of the money bothered Alice Palmer not at all. If money was used in good cause, it was good money despite its origins. She wrote Scudder that the trustees would act with "conscientious care, and their decision will be on moral grounds," reminding Vida that Palmer herself "seven years ago had to decide whether I would take a responsible office in the organization of a college founded by Mr. Rockefeller." [25](#) Palmer voted to accept the gift and so urged the trustees and suggested she and Vida agree to disagree and yet respect each other. [26](#) In fact she rejoiced in the gift and gave Caroline Hazard full credit for it. To her old secretary, Anna McCoy, Palmer wrote: "Miss Hazard grows better everyday! . . . How good for Wellesley." [27](#) Moreover she personally made sure the endowment would be forthcoming. When nearly \$10,000 of the funds needed to pay the

college's debts was yet to be raised and commencement was only four days away, she, George, and their faithful friend Edwin Abbott pledged their personal savings, if necessary, to complete the fund. [28](#) Fortunately the money was raised elsewhere.

Since 1881, when Alice Freeman assumed the presidency, Wellesley had gradually been transformed from Henry Durant's ideal, a haven where hard-working, deserving, "calico girls" could be trained for Christian womanhood, into a well-financed liberal arts college with a faculty of professional scholars and scientists that exercised considerable curricular autonomy. This was a far cry from the mid- 1870s when Durant governed and financed his own private fiefdom. Much of the credit for the change is attributable to Alice Palmer.

However, Alice Freeman's careful monitoring of the higher education of women was not confined to Wellesley. In the spring of 1902 she made two speeches in New York, but also consulted at Barnard College and the Veltin School. [29](#) She accepted a post on the board of Bradford Academy and worked hard to bring the problem-laden school up to twentieth-century standards. [30](#) She devoted many days to the work of the State Board of Education. She earlier had participated on the committee that raised the money to ensure the Johns Hopkins Medical School would be open to women. [31](#) During nine days in January of 1902 she had meetings or conferences for some board or other every day except one. [32](#)

By the 1890s Alice Freeman Palmer's ideas on higher education were as carefully formulated as they would ever be. Her 1891 *Forum* article was republished in Anna Brackett's *Woman and the Higher Education* in 1893. She made no changes in the text. Perhaps none were asked. Her much-delivered lecture, *Why Go to College*, was published in pamphlet form by Thomas Crowell and Co. in 1897. These two articles are the only formal statements of Alice Palmer's educational philosophy from her own pen.

*Why Go to College* was a straightforward if hortatory answer to the question posed in its title. Palmer asserted that higher education for women provided an insurance policy in case of economic need. It also brought many larger benefits. It stimulated occupation, the appreciation of diversity, a hospitality to new ideas, an ability to serve society, and of course the capacity to be a better wife and mother. [33](#)

The "Higher Education of Women" article was largely descriptive. She cataloged the profound changes the previous quarter century had brought to higher education overall, changes on which there was still no general agreement, such as the elective system, age of admission, and degree requirements. However, Palmer had been an ardent supporter of the changes. She then discussed the three types of higher education available to women: coeducation, the affiliated college, and the women's college. She saw coeducation as the least expensive way to provide for women and also the most widespread. However, she credited coeducation with much more than frugality and accessibility. She affirmed that only the best-equipped universities could provide training in advanced research. Many were in Europe. Some were in the United States. All were now closed or had once been closed to women. They must all be made coeducational if women's scholarship was to thrive. She wrote of her own experience at the University of Michigan where men and women were treated exactly alike and saw this equality as developing strength and independent

balance. She believed that "in a large tract of her character-- is it the largest tract?--[a young woman's] needs and those of the young man are identical." [34](#)

She saw as coeducation's only disadvantage that, "refining home influences and social oversight are largely lacking." [35](#) It was, of course, this lack that she had tried to remedy at Chicago. She admitted that the women's college did provide students with "a home within its own walls" and helped "develop other powers than the merely intellectual," necessitating a faculty that must be more than specialists and scholars. [36](#) She admitted the importance of women's colleges in building "character, inspiring service to others, cultivating manners, developing taste. . . ." [37](#) But the upshot of her argument was that the women's college could not provide adequate research training.

The affiliated college or annex "lives by favor not by right," and that was its greatest disadvantage. The uncertainty of faculty (who at the Harvard Annex, for example, were all paid volunteers from the Harvard faculty) made orderly pursuit of science and laboratory courses difficult. [38](#) Annie Nathan Meyer, one of Barnard's founders, disagreed with Palmer in a lively debate in the periodical press about the disadvantages of the annex, especially Barnard. [39](#) To Palmer, however, coeducation was the wave of the future, as it was of course to be. [40](#) She foresaw in *Why Go to College*, even before she went to Chicago, what she would pioneer on that campus--coeducational universities solving the problem of "home influences" by taking more responsibility for their "girls," a commitment to in loco parentis that was to prevail for better or for worse until the 1970s.

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### 3

Meanwhile Alice Palmer returned to her demanding lecture schedule. She promised eight commencement addresses for June of 1897. [41](#) The following June, except for a brief respite when she returned home for the Wellesley commencement, she lectured almost every day, and complained to George, "How shall I keep it up?" [42](#) Not only did she deliver her platform lectures but she was expected to give informal advice and counseling, attend teas and dinners, and meet with influential citizens everywhere she went. From Western College for Women in Ohio she sent George a clipping of her schedule as outlined in the local newspaper and commented, "You can see I am expected to earn my hundred dollars in the next two days." [43](#) As was true earlier in their marriage, part of the motivation for this demanding schedule seems to have been economic. As she began another tour she wrote in the spring of 1898, "If I can only make good speeches and come back with money to pay the month's bills I shall be perfectly happy." [44](#) The Palmers missed her Chicago salary, and she attempted to partly compensate for its loss by her lectures. However, almost always her subject was "The New Education" or "Why Should Girls Go To College?" She was also doing her bit for the higher education of women.

Hers was a grueling schedule especially on tour, but her general health was much better after 1895 than it had been in previous years. Her major physical catastrophe was a serious accident in November of 1898. She was returning to Cambridge by trolley from doing errands in Boston, stepped off the car, and was hit by a bicyclist riding on the wrong side of the street. She was

unconscious nearly twenty- four hours. Undoubtedly she suffered a concussion, possibly a skull fracture, because nausea, heavy hemorrhaging, violent headache, and amnesia plagued her for several days. She was in bed for weeks, and months passed before she made a full recovery. [45](#) Her only other debilitating bout with ill health was an operation for hemorrhoids at the New England Hospital For Women and Children in the late summer of 1901. [46](#) Her surgeon, for at the time women typically looked to women for treatment, was Emma L. Call who taught hygiene at Wellesley in the 1890s. [47](#) However her lungs, the scourge of her earlier years, never bothered her seriously after the Palmers' second European sabbatical.

Perhaps more important to her well-being, Alice Palmer had finally made her peace with being George's wife. She had found a new and satisfying form of usefulness. George's family became increasingly important to her, especially his cousin, Robert Herrick, and his wife Harriet. Their bonds to Alice had been cemented in Chicago when Herrick became a faculty member sponsored by both the Palmers. Although Harriet was Robert's first cousin, Alice had encouraged their marriage. George reluctantly agreed but counseled, as a late- nineteenth-century eugenics enthusiast, that they have no children. They ignored George's advice, and Alice Palmer Herrick was born to them in 1896. Unfortunately she was severely retarded and physically handicapped, but Alice always referred to her during the child's short life as her granddaughter, and was marvelously supportive to the beleaguered Herricks. Fred Palmer's son Eric, always a favorite, lived with them while he attended Harvard. The Palmer family celebrated Thanksgiving, New England fashion, as the year's major holiday, and the ritual gathering of the clan most often took place around Alice and George's dining table in Cambridge. George was close to his family, especially his brothers and the Herricks, and Alice embraced them with him.

Alice's family was also much in evidence, especially her sister Ella and her husband Charles Talmadge, who continued to be in and out of Cambridge throughout the 1890s. Charles received a Harvard M.A. in 1900 which required a year in residence. He had abandoned Methodism for Congregationalism a year or two earlier. The result was that he was not permanently settled in a parish until the fall of 1901. [48](#) Fred Freeman married in 1895, and at long last Alice's sister Stella was replaced after a fashion by her namesake, Fred's infant daughter, another Estella, born in 1901. Alice found her bewitching. "Her eyes shine like stars, and she laughs and flirts, and makes herself fascinating at every turn." [49](#)

The Freemans' prosperity was now assured. Alice's parents owned seven houses and lots in Saginaw, and "Fred is very prosperous if he chooses to save." [50](#) Her mother's health improved as she grew older, and she was able to join Alice at a family reunion at Osborn Hollow in 1899 followed by a visit to the Palmer's Boxford farm. [51](#) The Susquehanna family reunion was repeated the next year with her father present. She and her father visited the old farm where she was born and the country school she had attended until she was seven. It was a nostalgic occasion, and she wrote George, "If you could only see this heavenly valley and the lovely chestnut crowned hills." [52](#) But George never accompanied her to Broome County. Father Freeman suffered a severe bout with what was called heart failure in 1902, but rallied and outlived his daughter by many years. [53](#)

Although they still suffered from acute cash crises on occasion, the Palmers found themselves in comfortable circumstances. Their joint income which had been \$6,000 in 1892 had risen to

\$9,300 in 1893, largely because of Alice's position at Chicago, but also because both had lucrative speaking engagements that year. For example, George gave ten lectures at Chautauqua and Alice six. [54](#) In 1897 George's Harvard salary was raised to \$5,000; also stock they owned and thought worthless suddenly acquired considerable value. Edwin Abbott had given George 100 shares of railroad stock in 1885 that they believed without value, but the company was now assumed by the Wisconsin Central Railroad as part of a reorganization. They were paid \$1,200 in back interest and the stock itself was redeemed for over \$10,000. George calculated that with their other savings, they now had a nest egg of \$20,000 at 5 percent. [55](#) Also Robert Herrick repaid them a loan of \$1,500 they had made to help him finance his European journey in 1895. George protested repayment, insisting that the loan was really a gift because he thought of Herrick as a son. Although refusing interest, he accepted the money, and deposited it in an endowment fund for Alice. [56](#)

The Palmers had extravagant tastes, but they also were very generous. They paid half the expenses of George's niece by his first marriage at Hyannis Normal School and supported another needy distant relative at the University of Iowa. [57](#) For many years Alice contributed to the support and work of Charlotte Hawkins Brown, a young black woman who worked as a nursemaid and whom Alice encountered on a Boston street corner reading Virgil. Palmer subsidized Brown's education at normal school and sometimes single-handedly supported a struggling school for poor blacks that Hawkins Brown later founded in the South. [58](#) Year after year the Palmers gave away a large proportion of their income. Alice calculated that by the end of January of 1900 their gifts since the previous September totalled over \$800. [59](#) George's Harvard salary was still \$5,000, and this generosity was made possible at the considerable personal sacrifice of their killing schedule on the lecture circuit.

The Palmers were generous with their personal income but also with their other resources. In 1900, 1,200 Cuban teachers were guests of Harvard to help Cuba prepare for its new role as a United States possession. The Palmers were active in helping raise the \$70,000 necessary to finance their stay. They also opened their Cambridge home to Alice Gordon Gulick, who had been forced, because of the Spanish-American War, to leave Spain and evacuate the International Institute for Girls which she headed. [60](#)

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## 4

The Palmers' two houses became increasingly important in both their lives as they grew older. During the first years of their marriage they had rented Cambridge houses, small and furnished, that required a single servant, but by 1890 they felt a strong need for a permanent home of their own. They considered building on land owned by and adjacent to the home of Edwin Abbott, their benefactor and good friend, but Alice was reluctant. As she saw it, they dared not risk any near-neighbor strains; "nothing at all of our pleasant relations must be so much as touched." Abbott was also on the Wellesley Board of Visitors which no doubt fed her reluctance. Instead she suggested they borrow "\$5,000 of Professor Horsford and buy the Craigie Street house at once, and settle the building problem." [61](#) They had building plans drawn that they liked very much, but abandoned the idea of a new house designed for them as financially imprudent. Alice

wanted something permanent that they could furnish and feel at home in, but like George she feared financial overcommitment. [62](#) Finally they agreed to take the great botanist Asa Gray's house at 3 Mason Street, Cambridge, unfurnished, at \$1,200 a year. They furnished it over the summer and agreed they would help make ends meet by renting rooms to students, a practice they followed the rest of their lives. [63](#)

The Palmers lived very comfortably on Mason Street until 1894 when the Peabody house on Quincy Street became available, and Alice's Chicago salary placed it almost within their means. George leapt at the chance of installing himself next door to President Eliot in one of the three houses within Harvard Yard. Alice was busy in Chicago during most of the remodeling and refurbishment. It was George's project, and he wrote her in January: "I am all aglow to be settled there and am confident we shall feel more at home than we have ever felt anywhere except in Boxford. The Library, and parlor, and yes your study, will be beautiful rooms." [64](#) The Quincy Street house still stands, a handsome classic early Federal house with high ceilings, square rooms, and marble mantels. The thirty-six foot library with hard pine floors (eventually covered with two oriental rugs) and large windows looking out on the trees and lawns of Harvard Yard was a new addition created by George. He also designed and had built a convenient pantry and first-floor lavatory.

The Palmers moved to Quincy Street during March of 1894 soon after Alice returned from one of her Chicago stints. The remodeling had cost them nearly \$3,000 and the long-term lease from Harvard Corporation another \$7,500. [65](#) Their financial resources were strained, but as usual they worried a little, and then did what they wanted. And their open hospitality only increased. A stream of visitors, from college students to college presidents was always welcome. The great philosophers of the era, as Lucy Sprague reminisced, George Santayana, William James, Josiah Royce, and Hugo Munsterberg, were all intimates of the household. [66](#) Wellesley's hard-working princess had been handsomely installed in her own palace created by George.



### **Alice and George in the library of the house on Quincy Street. (Courtesy of Wellesley College Archives.)**

For Christmas and spring vacations and in the long hot Boston summers the Palmers retired to Boxford, the property that had been in the Palmer family for generations and where various relatives maintained summer quarters. The family seems to have owned the property communally at first, but in 1896 Alice and George acquired outright the house George had occupied for years by buying the shares of two other family members. [67](#) They began to repair and refurbish this house in 1891, adding a large piazza and a study-library, and brought their own servants with them for the summer rather than depending on the tenants in the farm house for domestic help. [68](#)

They saw life at Boxford as brief excursions into a bucolic paradise. They walked in the woods, birded in the meadows, bathed in the pond, and cherished the moonlight from the piazza. They bottled and preserved the produce of the farm for winter use, and packed apples and potatoes in barrels to be transported to Cambridge. They read assiduously, and George wrote his articles and



books. Boxford was only a short train ride from Boston so necessary academic business could be handled easily. Both Alice and George commuted to Boston when Wellesley, Harvard, or other responsibilities called.

But they also entertained. During the summer of 1897 twenty-five house guests were sheltered under their Boxford roof, one for three weeks, and fifteen people attended one dinner party. [69](#) Chicago friends, the Spragues, the Laughlins, the Hales, the Herricks, as well as family members, were often among their visitors.

Cambridge-Boxford was a kind of double sonata with the movements attuned to the seasons. Although the yearly patterns of their lives were tied to the academic calendar, they rang the changes in their rhythms in seasonal sequence, the first green buds of spring, July heat, autumn's colors, the black and whiteness of a Boxford December. Both Palmers were acutely aware of seasonal permutations at both their houses, a new shrub in bloom on Quincy Street, a shade of green in the Boxford woods. Every blossom, every horticultural triumph, every change of wind or temperature is documented in their letters to each other. Just as there had been a palpable physical passion between them early in their relationship, a sexuality that one hardly expected in staid middle-aged Victorians devoted to professional duties, their life together in the late 1890s had a visual and sensual element that revolved around place. They were conscious of where they were, be it Saginaw, Quincy Street, Boxford, or Venice. The Palmers were highly involved with people, but they were also involved with the flowers they saw, the water that moved past, and the air they breathed. They built themselves an expansive urban environment on Harvard Yard and a sylvan retreat at Boxford. It was a rich life.

The Palmers had young people living with them from the time they acquired the Mason Street house, at least in part to help meet the expenses of a large establishment. Some were relatives, others were the children of friends, and all were treated as members of the family. Eric Palmer, the son of George's brother Fred, lived with them while at Harvard. Agatha Laughlin, daughter of one of the Palmers' Chicago academic friends, spent a year with them while she attended Miss Ingall's School. Lucy Sprague, whom Alice had known since she lived with the Spragues in Chicago for several weeks when Lucy was fourteen, spent her Radcliffe years with the Palmers. She came to Cambridge as a Radcliffe "special" in 1896 and in more than one way she became their surrogate daughter. She was with them in Paris when Alice died. When young Bobby Hale, whom they had known since their honeymoon journey in Italy, was ready for Harvard he also joined the family, and for awhile the Sprague's son Albert took his meals with them. There were others who lived on Quincy Street for shorter periods. [70](#)

The Palmers treated the more permanent residents among these young people as their children. They took them into their lives and in turn participated in the hopes, fears, and training of their young guests. They were nurturant parents, George perhaps more so than Alice because he was more often at home. While Alice was away at Chicago or on one lecture tour or another, he cherished their companionship, entertained their friends, and tried to instill a sense of order and discipline into their lives. He reported at length on his interactions with them to Alice. Lucy Sprague Mitchell wrote of the household that the Palmers "became a part of me and I became part of them," that she felt really free with them. They lived "a rich intellectual life and a rich human life and they took me into both." [71](#) The Palmers experienced the joys but also suffered

the traumas of parenting. George's nephew Joe, always a problem, became Lucy's swain for awhile much to their discomfiture. Eventually he was expelled from Harvard for peddling pornography and was arrested. George was disgusted and upset, but he bailed him out and assisted him to skip bail and take off for Mexico. [72](#) References to this incident in George and Alice's correspondence are veiled. But George showed that he was no self-righteous martinet and that the expert on ethics was quite capable of dealing realistically with human problems, even if it meant bending the law.

It was a large and active household with many callers and many guests, professional and personal. Both Palmers did much of their professional work at home and many essentially business conferences were held at Quincy Street over luncheon or tea. Also George did some of his seminary teaching and conferred with students at home. The campus office for professors did not exist in the nineteenth century. Most teaching was done in classrooms or laboratories in or near the Yard, but all other academic chores were performed in professorial residences.

Answering the mail in the days before the telephone was a daily chore for a busy academic couple. Appointments were made, invitations given and accepted, recommendations requested and transmitted by letter, and these communications usually demanded immediate attention. Servants eased the Palmers' domestic chores considerably and spared them most of the drudgery, but there were no secretaries for busy professors. Those chores they performed themselves. It was not uncommon for them to report that the letter they at last found time to write to each other was the twentieth letter each had written that evening. [73](#)

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## 5

Alice Freeman Palmer's established position in higher education made it possible for her to succumb to the richness of Cambridge life. Her role at the University of Chicago had provided her with an invincible redoubt and insured her continued importance in academia. She no longer needed an institutional platform. She now felt sure of her position in the professional world. She could enjoy her life as mistress of a varied household.

Women today easily fault Alice Palmer for abandoning her career at Chicago. If they find relinquishing her Chicago post acceptable, they wonder why she did not find another appointment. First of all, she was exhausted and unwell. Twice she turned her back on splendid professional opportunities because fully extending herself would have meant physical disaster. Secondly, George is partly responsible. He wanted Alice home and available. However, there is a third reason. Alice Palmer, like other highly trained women of the 1890s, found volunteer responsibilities that fit her professional qualifications deeply rewarding. She did not see the Wellesley trusteeship, for example, as busy work, something to occupy her time or to keep her from being bored. Nor did she view these tasks as making less than maximum use of her training and skills. Of course if she had lived in the 1970s she would have been president of a major university, but that is not when she lived. During the post-Chicago years Alice Palmer continued to play a major role in women's higher education. Many other married women working as unpaid

volunteers saw themselves as using their training equally well. They were making crucial decisions that had profound effects on social policy. [74](#)

Alice Freeman Palmer's influence on women's higher education was multiplied by her marriage and the circles in which she moved. By the mid-1890s she and George probably knew personally everyone of importance in higher education in the United States. She knew the major English women educators, and he knew the British and German philosophers. She was intimate with the whole Chicago cultural and educational community. George knew most major college presidents in the United States and was consulted by them. Between them they were a veritable academic communications center, and one that was heavily used.

In January of 1902 while George Palmer was lecturing in Bangor, Maine, Alice gave a luncheon at their home on Quincy Street. Twelve women educators from the northeastern United States had been invited. All accepted. Carolyn Hazard, then president of Wellesley sat opposite Alice Palmer, but leaders from Smith, Pembroke, Vassar, and Ellen Richards, founder of the America Home Economics Association and active in Collegiate Alumnae, were all present. Palmer thought it "the pleasantest luncheon I have ever given." The last guests tarried until six o'clock discussing scholarships and opportunities for European graduate study for women. [75](#) This kind of informal influence made Alice Palmer's place in women's higher education unique. Had the dilemma at last been resolved? Had George Palmer's promise during their courtship days that by giving up the Wellesley presidency and joining forces with him at Cambridge she would "increase her powers," expand her influence, come true? Certainly it seemed an arguable proposition by the late 1890s. Nonetheless, if Alice Palmer had failed to insist on accepting the appointment at the University of Chicago, a choice George certainly resisted with all the arguments at his command, her position by 1900 as arbiter of women's higher education would have been much less secure.

Alice Palmer thought of her choice of marriage as positive. She constantly reassured herself that marriage was the way she wanted to live her life. She wrote George in 1897: "What a beautiful life we do have! I think of it more and more, especially when I am away from you and long to be there again. . . . No one else is like you dear." [76](#) She continually speaks in their correspondence of her joy in choosing marriage to such a worthy and stimulating partner. However, one cannot help but wonder at her need to constantly avow the wisdom of her choice.

Alice Palmer wrote a number of poems, many of which she gave to George as a birthday gift late in her life. Although this was a purely personal outpouring, and she expressly stipulated on her death bed that they be destroyed, in 1915 George Palmer published many of them in a slight volume, *A Marriage Cycle*. Whether the title was his or hers, I do not know. She may have attached it to the manuscript version when she presented it to him. As poems they leave much to be desired. The meter often falters; they almost never scan. The rhymes are often contrived. But she felt moved enough in thinking about their relationship to write them. Obviously she found a kind of catharsis in the act, as well as paying generous tribute to George as a husband, which she did in most of them. But perhaps her need indicates some kind of appeasement for second thoughts. And the second thoughts are there. In a poem called "The Last Anniversary" she writes:

Fifteen years ago, dear Fifteen years today! Let us walk our fields together While  
we may. . . . . One third of my life, dear Since I heard you call, And put by my  
work and, rising, Gave you all. [77](#)

More revealing are verses she titled "Myself."

Oh, to be alone! To escape from the work, the play, The talking every day! To escape from all I  
have done And all that remains to do! To escape,--yes, even from you, My only Love,--and be  
Alone and free! Could I only stand Beneath pale moon and gray sky, Where the winds and the  
sea-gulls cry, And no man is at hand, And feel the free air blow On my rain-wet face, and know I  
am free,--not yours, but my own,-- Free and alone! . . . . . I am only you. I am yours, part of  
you, your wife, And I have no other life. I cannot think, cannot do; I cannot breathe, cannot see;  
There is "us," but there is not "me." And worst, at your touch I grow Contented so! [78](#)

Certainly in these poems she expressed ambivalence about marriage and the course her life took.  
Did George see this? Probably not, or he would never have published them. George was a master  
at seeing only what he wanted to see in Alice's life.

However, George himself was not unwilling to test their marriage with second thoughts. He  
never quite gave up his first love. Did Alice not quite measure up? Was she less than tractable,  
and did he on some level resent this? He wrote Alice in 1901: "This is my original Wedding Day,  
and I should have been married thirty years had she lived. . . . Now we have had more than half  
that number, and nearly twice as many as poor Nell and I had. She was so exquisite. It is a loss  
you can never repair not to have known her." [79](#) One cannot help wonder how that letter made  
poor Alice feel. Perhaps she had worked through her feelings about Nell so well that it didn't  
matter, but I doubt it. No marriage is perfect, and certainly over the years the Palmers received in  
large measure love, strength, and understanding from each other, but Alice's ambivalence (and  
perhaps George's) remained.



**One of the last portraits of Alice Freeman Palmer. (Courtesy of Wellesley College Archives.)**

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## 6

On September 24, 1902, the Palmers again sailed for Europe. Lucy Sprague, who had lost her  
mother that year and who had once more fled to the Palmers for succor, was with them. This  
time their vessel was a cattle boat that rolled and tossed in early fall storms as the cattle bellowed  
their distress, but everyone seems to have had a good appetite and a rollicking time. [80](#) The trio  
spent a few days in the English Lake District following the haunts and allusions of George  
Herbert whose work George was then editing. They stayed briefly with the master of Balliol

College at Oxford, and spent time researching Herbert at the British Museum and exploring the National Gallery and St. Paul's. [81](#)

The Palmers clearly enjoyed being accompanied by an energetic, young companion. Near the end of October they crossed the Channel to Paris where they found their old apartment unavailable, but they were able to establish themselves close by on the Avenue Marceau and again engaged Marie, their servant from previous visits. They easily resumed their usual routine, working on Herbert in the mornings (Lucy acted as George's research assistant) and excursions and museums in the afternoon. [82](#) On All Saint's Day, at Alice's request, they visited the cemetery at Père Lachaise where they had never been, hunting out the graves of the famous along with the thousands of other Parisians paying them honor. Alice bestowed a bunch of violets on the tomb of Héloïse whom she had always admired. That night she said to George that although she believed the choice of disposal of the dead was for the living to make, "I hope I may be cremated." [83](#)

Before November was out Alice Palmer was ailing intermittently with abdominal pain, but between attacks she felt well. The attacks, however, did not disappear and became more severe. Her condition was diagnosed as intussusception of the intestine, in which the intestine telescopes on itself. She was told her illness was possibly congenital. [84](#) Eventually surgery was recommended. She understood its dangers and made her preparations. She canceled future engagements, counseled George how to best order his life for his first year of deep loss, and commissioned him to take care of Lucy who would be traumatized by two bereavements so close together. The surgery was at first seen as successful, but intestinal resection was invariably risky before antibiotics became available. Three days later, on December 6, 1902, she died in a small private Catholic hospital in Paris. She was forty-seven. [85](#)

Lucy braided Alice's chestnut hair in the crown she usually wore. There was a small simple service at the Foreign Chapel, and George had her body cremated as she had wished. Before the month was out, the bereft sixty-three-year-old man and the young woman forty years his junior made their way back across the Atlantic carrying a small wooden box containing Alice Freeman Palmer's ashes. [86](#) It was Lucy who made the sad journey to Saginaw to console the Freemans.

If George Palmer is an accurate reporter, Alice Palmer met death as she had lived--easily, pragmatically, making plans for her near and dear to ease the transition for them. [87](#) No one loved life more than Alice Palmer, but she also could accept death, as witnessed by the words she spoke at a friend's funeral: "We make too much of the circumstance we call death. All life is one. All service one, be it here or there. Death is only one little door from one room to another." [88](#) She may still have believed in heaven.

Alice Freeman Palmer had a short life, but a full one. She had pioneered at a coeducational university as one of its first woman students. She had been among the first women faculty at an early degree-granting college for women. She had presided directly and indirectly for nearly a quarter of a century over the development of Wellesley College into a first-rate college for women with a scholarly professional faculty. She had changed the patterns of coeducational universities through her connection with Chicago, not as much as she would have liked, but perhaps more than she knew. She had brought the New Woman to the twentieth century. She

personally had traversed the course, from the emphasis on economic independence for single women in the 1880s through an independent career at Chicago as a married woman, to a kind of resolution through the creative volunteerism that marked many married professional women's efforts in the last decades of the nineteenth and first sixty years of the twentieth century. She had combined her volunteerism with her deeply felt need to contribute to the Palmers' financial support. She had experimented cautiously, as I have suggested earlier, with the 1920s New Woman's sexual liberties. Her life patterned the evolution of the New Woman.

Who knows what Alice Freeman Palmer would have had to contribute to the twentieth century. Very little, I think. She would have continued to be a positive force in promoting higher education for women, but others, like M. Carey Thomas, the new president of Bryn Mawr, would assume leadership. The Palmers' Cambridge salon would have gradually lost influence in the total academic picture as it did for aging George. As it was, Alice Freeman Palmer died to memorial accolades, Wellesley scholarships, a University of Michigan chair, a Chicago carillon, all named after her. She deserved them. She had done her work well for her time and place.

## Chapter Ten Notes

- [1](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman Palmer, January 7, 1895. Wellesley Typescripts.
- [2](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to Elizabeth Wallace, March 17, 1896.
- [3](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to Robert Herrick, July 30, 1895. Robert Herrick Papers, University of Chicago Archives. Alice Freeman Palmer to Anna McCoy, November 17, 1895.
- [4](#) George Herbert Palmer to Robert Herrick, September 7, 1895. Robert Herrick Papers, University of Chicago Archives.
- [5](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to Robert Herrick, September 23, 1895. Robert Herrick Papers, University of Chicago Archives.
- [6](#) Palmer, *Life*, 199.
- [7](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to Elizabeth Wallace, March 17, 1896.
- [8](#) Palmer, *Life*, 201-2.
- [9](#) *Ibid.*, 202.
- [10](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to Robert Herrick, December 1, 1896. Robert Herrick Papers, University of Chicago Archives.
- [11](#) Minutes of the Board of Trustees, March 27, 1895; Minutes of the Executive Committee, April 23, 1897. Wellesley College Archives.

[12](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, [January] 1897. George Herbert Palmer Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

[13](#) *Wellesley College Catalog*, 1896-97, 19; Palmieri, "Adamless Eden," 163- 71.

[14](#) Minutes of the Board of Trustees, June 3, 21; October 6, 1897. Wellesley College Archives.

[15](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, May 5, 1898. George Herbert Palmer Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

[16](#) Minutes of the Executive Committee, May 4, 25; September 21; Minutes of the Board of Trustees June 2, 20, 1898; February 2, 1899. Wellesley College Archives.

[17](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, May 5, 1898. George Herbert Palmer Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Minutes of the Board of Trustees, February 1, 1900. Wellesley College Archives.

[18](#) President's Reports 1896, 40-41; *Ibid.*, 1898, 35. Wellesley College Archives.

[19](#) Minutes of the Executive Committee, February 23, 1898. Wellesley College Archives.

[20](#) Wells, *Marks and Woolley*, 53-54.

[21](#) Minutes of the Board of Trustees, March 7, 1899. Wellesley College Archives.

[22](#) See Margaret Clapp, "Caroline Hazard" in *Notable American Women*, 2:169-70; Glasscock, *Wellesley*, 60- 63.

[23](#) This assessment is based on the minutes of the Trustees and Executive Committee for those years.

[24](#) Minutes of the Board of Trustees, June 7, 1900. Wellesley College Archives.

[25](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to Vida Scudder, June 6, 1900.

[26](#) *Ibid.*

[27](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to Anna McCoy, March 27, 1900.

[28](#) *Diary*, 1899.

[29](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, undated [ca. March or April 1902]. Wellesley Typescripts.

[30](#) *Diary* enclosed in letter, Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, January 30, 1902. Wellesley Typescripts. Palmer, *Life*, 252-54.

- [31](#) Regina Markell Morantz-Sanchez, *Sympathy and Science: Women Physicians in American Medicine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 244, 399n.
- [32](#) *Diary* enclosed in letter, Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, January 30, 1902. Wellesley Typescripts.
- [33](#) A. F. Palmer, *Why Go to College*.
- [34](#) *Ibid.*, 33. A. F. Palmer, "Higher Education of Women" in Brackett, *Woman and the Higher Education*, 117-22.
- [35](#) A. F. Palmer, *Why Go to College*, 34.
- [36](#) *Ibid.*, 34-35.
- [37](#) A. F. Palmer, "Higher Education of Women," 117-18.
- [38](#) *Ibid.*, 38.
- [39](#) Annie Nathan Meyer, *Barnard Beginnings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1935), 43-45; Annie Nathan Meyer, *It's Been Fun: An Autobiography* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1951), 176.
- [40](#) I disagree, especially in emphasis, with the analysis in Roberta Frankfort's *Collegiate Women*.
- [41](#) George Herbert Palmer to Robert Herrick, May 23, 1897. Robert Herrick Papers, University of Chicago Archives.
- [42](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, June 17, 1898. George Herbert Palmer Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- [43](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, November 3, 1897. George Herbert Palmer Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- [44](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, April 26, 1898. George Herbert Palmer Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- [45](#) *Diary*, November 9, 1898.
- [46](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, August 26, 1901. Wellesley Typescripts.
- [47](#) Correspondence of Alice Freeman Palmer and George Herbert Palmer, August 1901. Wellesley Typescripts. Verbrugge, *Able-Bodied Womanhood*, 174.
- [48](#) *Diary*, 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901.



- [49](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, June 22, 1901. Wellesley Typescripts.
- [50](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, December 14, 1901. Wellesley Typescripts.
- [51](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, July 15, 7, 1899. George Herbert Palmer Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University; *Diary*, 1899.
- [52](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, August 7, 1900. George Herbert Palmer Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- [53](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, April 13, 1902. Wellesley Typescripts.
- [54](#) *Diary*, 1893.
- [55](#) *Diary*, 1897-99.
- [56](#) George Herbert Palmer to Robert Herrick, January 16, 1901. Robert Herrick Papers, University of Chicago Archives.
- [57](#) *Diary*, 1899.
- [58](#) See the *Women's Missionary Magazine*, August 1930, 12, in the Charlotte Hawkins Brown Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.
- [59](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, February 15, 1900, undated. George Herbert Palmer Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- [60](#) Morris, "Alice Freeman Palmer," 170; *Diary*, 1900.
- [61](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, May 21, 22, 1890. Wellesley Typescripts.
- [62](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman Palmer, May 28, 1890; Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, May 29, 1890. Wellesley Typescripts.
- [63](#) *Diary*, 1890.
- [64](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman Palmer, January 2, 1894. Wellesley Typescripts.
- [65](#) Correspondence of Alice Freeman Palmer and George Herbert Palmer, January-April 1894. Wellesley Typescripts. *Diary*, January 1894; Mitchell, *Two Lives*, 117.
- [66](#) Mitchell, *Two Lives*, 119-22.
- [67](#) *Diary*, 22-26 September 1896.
- [68](#) *Diary*, 1891.

[69](#) *Diary*, 1897.

[70](#) The *Diary* in Alice Freeman Palmer Papers records who is living with them each year, and of course, these household members are frequently mentioned in the correspondence ( *Diary*, 1890-1902).

[71](#) Mitchell, *Two Lives*, 121.

[72](#) *Ibid.*, 126.

[73](#) Alice had a secretary, Anna McCoy, when she was president of Wellesley and also used stenographic help on occasion. Frances Willard employed multiple typists by the 1890s. Perhaps women were quicker than men to use stenographic assistance. President Angell of the University of Michigan never employed clerical help, even in the twentieth century. George took up the typewriter briefly in the early 1890s but seemed to abandon it after a brief experiment. A few typewritten letters of Alice exist for the late 1890s, but whether she typed them herself, used a professional typist, or perhaps the services of one of the young people in the house, is not clear. The typewriter, which began to catch on in the 1880s, quickly changed office practice in the business world and made professional stenographers essential, but academicians were slower to adopt the new technology. See JoAnne Yates, *Control through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), chap. 2.

[74](#) Although Anne Firor Scott in *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), is principally concerned with the associations and not the continuance of a career as a volunteer, much of what she says about women's satisfactions and opportunities in voluntary organizations applies to Alice Palmer's life after 1895. (See especially page 24 and chapter 8.) Scott discusses the ease with which women combined volunteer responsibilities with paid work (155-57).

[75](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, January 30, 1902. Wellesley Typescripts.

[76](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, November 2, 1897. George Herbert Palmer Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

[77](#) A. F. Palmer, *A Marriage Cycle*, 67.

[78](#) *Ibid.*, 36-37.

[79](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman Palmer, June 15, 1901. Wellesley Typescripts. Helen Magill White, Andrew Dickson White's second wife, felt keenly that her husband treasured his first wife above her, since he arranged to be buried next to her, had her picture in every room of their house, and permitted his first wife's mother and sister to go on living with them after their marriage (Altschuler, *Better than Second Best*, chap. 5). George was not quite so insensitive, but he never forgot or let Alice forget his Ellen.

[80](#) Mitchell, *Two Lives*, 129-30; *Diary*, 1902.

[81](#) Mitchell, *Two Lives*, 130; Palmer, *Life*, chap. 14.

[82](#) Mitchell, *Two Lives*, 130; Palmer, *Life*, chap. 14.

[83](#) Palmer, *Life*, 323.

[84](#) Alice's brother Fred was later to specialize in this kinds of surgery and according to Alice's niece, Fred's daughter Stella Novy, he never lost a case. Interview with Stella Novy, October 1988, by Ruth Bordin.

[85](#) Palmer, *Life*, chap. 14.

[86](#) Mitchell, *Two Lives*, 132-33.

[87](#) Palmer, *Life*, 325.

[88](#) *Ibid.*, 311.