

Alice Freeman Palmer

The Evolution of a New Woman

Ruth Bordin

Frontispiece photo of Alice Freeman Palmer courtesy of Wellesley College Archives.

For the Wednesday lunchers, who each in her way was a New Woman

Preface

The research for this biography of Alice Freeman Palmer began thirty-five years ago as I put together an exhibit for the Bentley Historical Library honoring the 1957 centennial of the inauguration of the teaching of history at the University of Michigan. Two women who trained in the pioneer history seminar of Charles Kendall Adams caught my attention, Alice Freeman and Lucy Salmon. I was startled to find women pursuing graduate training in history at that early date. I was also caught by the fact that both became distinguished educators with long careers. My interest in Palmer was rekindled thirty years later in the spring of 1987 by a symposium on "Changes in the Lives of Educated Women," sponsored by the Center for the Continuing Education for Women at the University of Michigan. At the symposium I particularized the wider picture of women and higher education in a brief paper on women's experience at the University of Michigan from 1870 to 1987. Palmer's wider influence on women's higher education attracted my attention once more.

Alice Freeman Palmer's career was distinguished and certainly not forgotten by scholars. She was a pioneer alumna of the first great American university to admit women; president of Wellesley College and a key figure on its board of trustees during two of its most crucial decades; the first dean at the University of Chicago; and leader, arbiter, and spokeswoman for women's place in higher education during much of her adult life. But her name was hardly a household word. Although she attracted her share of media attention during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, only specialists in the higher education of women or loyal Wellesley chauvinists and college history buffs are likely to remember her today.

Nonetheless the story of Alice Freeman Palmer's life, lived during a time when women rapidly invaded the professions, especially education, when the financial independence of middle-class single females was gaining increasing acceptance, when to marry almost inevitably meant the end of a professional career, illustrates graphically the many attempts to solve the problems that have concerned independent women down to the present day.

I have tried to convey in chapter headings the uncertain progress of this evolving New Woman's life and her ambivalent quest for independence. Alice Freeman as president of Wellesley experienced fulfillment. In contemplating marriage she faced a dilemma, temporarily resolved with the challenge of her position at Chicago, and she eventually found a kind of resolution by

accepting a dual life and a dual role, a grand compromise that encompassed both fulfillment and sacrifice.

Her problems a hundred years ago were not so different from those of many late-twentieth-century women. Although she died fifteen years before I was born, I found it almost too easy to identify with Alice Freeman Palmer. Many of the issues she faced and the compromises she accepted were close to the dilemmas that had plagued my own life of seventy-five years. As I shared her story with other academic women they too found resemblances to their own victories and perplexities. A long look at a much earlier prototype may not assist in solving those problems, but there is a certain reassurance in the knowledge that the problems have been tackled before and workable compromises achieved even in a less liberated age.

Because of the contributions she made and the way she lived her life, Alice Freeman Palmer is important to historians of women, historians of education, and historians of professionalism. Nonetheless, she has not been the subject of a full-length biography since her husband's eulogistic memoir in 1908. [1](#) Despite a wealth of sources, her life course has not been investigated exhaustively. Caroline Hazard edited a delightful exchange of courtship letters between Freeman and the man who became her husband. [2](#) Sketches of her appear in studies dealing with women's higher education in the nineteenth century. [3](#) Wellesley College's history has been done at twenty-year intervals during this century, and Alice Freeman is never forgotten. [4](#) The most extensive treatment of her work at Wellesley is in Patricia Palmieri's doctoral dissertation. [5](#) Her Chicago career has been largely ignored. [6](#) But all of this does not add up to adequate treatment of a significant nineteenth-century educator.

Despite their profusion, sources posed some problems. Although Palmer left behind a rich cache of personal documents, this cache is restricted in scope and time. The only surviving diary is little more than a record book, useful but far from full or intimate. She wrote no autobiography. The vast bulk of her surviving correspondence is with George Herbert Palmer, the Harvard philosopher who became her husband in 1887. Therefore it covers only the period from the onset of their relationship in 1886 until her death. Her young adult years are adequately documented in her correspondence with Lucy Andrews, her college friend and confidant, but this correspondence ended when Lucy joined the Wellesley staff in 1884. Also a large, but insubstantial, file of letters to Eben Horsford relating to Wellesley College business has recently been deposited in the Wellesley Archives. Her presidency and her later influence on Wellesley through its board of trustees were of course recorded in the official minutes, but the dynamics of academic politics must be filled in from other sources, largely from her correspondence with George Palmer.

The published record left by Alice Freeman Palmer is negligible. Much of her influence in higher education was exerted in one-on-one encounters with other public figures and in the public speeches at which she excelled. Unfortunately her speeches were seldom, if ever, written, for she had that nineteenth-century gift of translating preparation and thought into an inspired spontaneity. She published very little in her lifetime. After her death, some of her writings were assembled by her husband to provide her with an oeuvre. [7](#)

Lack of published work by Palmer poses particular problems in getting at her ideas. In some ways her intimate life is more accessible than the intellectual framework that sustained her professional work. But of course one reason she did not publish was that a reasoned intellectual framework or ideology was not the way she got things done. She was a pragmatist and an improviser.

Where personal correspondence is available it is a very rich source. After Alice Freeman met George Palmer they saw each other very infrequently until a few months before their marriage, but they wrote confiding, detailed, comprehensive letters, sometimes more than once a day. Throughout their marriage they were frequently separated, and they wrote voluminously, often, and substantively to each other about their work. Thus in some ways Alice Palmer's tenure at the University of Chicago is the best-documented portion of her career. When she was absent from Chicago in Cambridge, she corresponded confidentially and fully with her Chicago colleagues William Rainey Harper, Marion Talbot, Laurence Laughlin, and Robert Herrick. Many of these letters have survived in the University of Chicago Archives and at Wellesley, and it is largely from these private sources, not used extensively before, that this biography has been constructed.

Much of the time I have felt uniquely privileged to participate on the highest level of intimacy in the living of Alice Freeman Palmer's life. I have been in her bedroom and at her table. More importantly, I have been privy to her frustrations with Pauline Durant, Wellesley's always vigilant and often difficult founding mother; I have followed step-by-step her decision to risk her career for marriage; I have watched her futile fight to convince her husband that a joint academic career at the University of Chicago would provide the most fulfilling path for their partnership. When the private sources are good, they are very good indeed. Using these sources I have recreated Alice Freeman Palmer's story. It is the story of a late-nineteenth-century professional woman who died too young to experience the changes the twentieth century brought, but whose life shows some of the problems and some of the solutions typical of both periods. She was born before the Civil War but in her lifelong struggle, often successful, to achieve independence from male control, she exemplifies the New Woman who had evolved by the century's end.

Many friends, colleagues, and archivists have contributed to this project. I owe a special debt to Wilma Slaight, Wellesley's archivist, for her help and support at every stage of this manuscript. I have also been substantially and cheerfully helped by archivists and librarians at the Bentley Historical Library, the Broome County Library, Bryn Mawr College, the University of Chicago, Carleton College, the Houghton Library, the Harvard University Archives, and the Schlesinger Library of Women's History. Two descendants of the Freeman and Palmer families, Stella Freeman Novy and Helen Palmer Avery, have also added several footnotes to the story.

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Diane Hatfield, Katharyn Pandora, Margaret Van Blaricom, and Carol Pintek have performed logistical services with skill, intelligence, and compassion. And Edward Bordin for over fifty years has been my understanding partner in resolving my own dilemma.

Preface Notes

- 1 George Herbert Palmer, *The Life of Alice Freeman Palmer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1908).
- 2 Caroline Hazard, ed., *An Academic Courtship: Letters of Alice Freeman Palmer and George Herbert Palmer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940).
- 3 See especially Barbara Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth Century Beginnings to the 1930's* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1984).
- 4 The most recent of these is Jean Glasscock, ed., *Wellesley College 1875- 1975: A Century of Women* (Wellesley, Mass.: Wellesley College Press, 1975).
- 5 Patricia Palmieri, "In Adamless Eden: A Social Portrait of the Academic Community at Wellesley College, 1875-1920" (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 1981).
- 6 Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), barely mentions her. Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) concentrates on Marion Talbot's career. George Palmer minimizes and distorts the Chicago period in his memoir.
- 7 Alice Freeman Palmer and George Herbert Palmer, *The Teacher: Essays and Addresses on Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1908).