Lavinia Dock: Adams County Suffragette

Mary Lou Schwartz
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Abstract
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The fiftieth anniversary in 1995 of the passing of the twentieth amendment granting women the right to vote has come and gone. In the aftermath of the celebrations held to commemorate this event, it is fitting to remember an Adams county resident who figured prominently in the most militant phase of the suffrage campaign—Lavinia Lloyd Dock.

Lavinia Dock was born February 26, 1858, the second child of Gilliard and Lavinia Lloyd Bombaugh Dock. Gilliard, who had attended Gettysburg College, was a well-to-do engineer and machinist. Both parents were liberal in their views. Lavinia said that “Father had some whimsical masculine prejudices, but Mother was broad on all subjects and very tolerant and charitable towards persons.” Although the family, eventually numbering five daughters and one son, grew up in this parental atmosphere that encouraged enlightened thinking, nothing in Lavinia’s privileged life gave any hint of the distinguished if unusual career that she would make for herself.
In 1884, at age twenty six, Lavinia read an article in *Century* magazine about the Bellevue Hospital Nursing School in New York City. She decided to become a registered nurse. At the time she made this decision, despite the respected example of Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton, nursing was not held in great esteem. In fact, an acquaintance of the family, when Lavinia entered nursing school, remarked: “But I thought the Dock girls were ladies.” In 1884 ladies did not seek employment. In her affluent home at 1427 North Front Street, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, no financial need forced her into a career, but off to Bellevue she went.

After graduation, Dock worked as a visiting nurse among the poor, working for a charitable society in Norwich, Connecticut, and for the Mission and Tract Society in New York City. In 1888, she went to Jacksonville, Florida to help in the yellow fever outbreak, and in 1889 she served with Clara Barton at the Johnstown flood in Pennsylvania. (Undoubtedly because of this and later community nursing experiences, she was asked in 1895 to formulate the rules for visiting nurses in Harrisburg, which were in force for years.)

In 1890 Lavinia returned to Bellevue as Night Supervisor. It was at this time that she began what was to become a very respected and remunerative literary career. She realized that there was a need for a book about medicine for nurses. With advice from her physician brother, she wrote *Materia Medica for Nurses*. The Putnam publishing house would not print her book without a guaranteed advance, so her father financed the first edition. This book was an immediate success. It became a standard text for nursing schools and was reprinted and revised through the 1930s.

Her four-volume *History of Nursing*, 1907-1912, also became a classic text for nursing schools. Adelaide Nutting, her student at Hopkins, assisted with volumes 1 and 2. In 1920, Dock published *A Short History of Nursing* with Isabelle Stewart. This book was given for many years at Bellevue graduation to the student with the highest scholastic standing. Also from this period came *Hygiene And Morality* in 1901. This was a nurses’ manual outlining the medical, social and legal aspects of venereal disease. In this book, Dock, always fearless and advanced beyond her associates, called for the abolition of the double standard of morality, demanded self-control by men . . . and argued for women’s suffrage. As an early and almost lone crusader against venereal disease, she became one of the earliest writers to bring this forbidden subject out into the open. The *History of Red Cross Nursing* in 1922 was her last book.

Her first known magazine article appeared in the first issue of the
American Journal of Nursing in 1900. (She also functioned as editor of the magazine’s foreign department). Although she wrote on many areas of nursing, her favorite themes stressed the needs for accredited registration, and the dignity and importance of the profession, independent of doctors.

In 1880, Dock left Bellevue to become the Assistant Superintendent of Nurses at the new Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. She established such a lasting record of superb quality of instruction, remembered through the years, that in 1955 Hopkins named a chemistry laboratory in her honor, stating that “in no small way its graduates pay tribute to Lavinia Dock, one of the first members of its brilliant faculty.”

Dock was invited to lecture at an international conference on hospitals organized by Hopkins doctor in Chicago in 1893 in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition. Her paper, “The Relation of Training Schools to Hospitals,” a favorite subject of hers, approved independent schools. She was never totally convinced that student nurses should do the routine hospital nursing typical of the hospital-training school. She was concerned with the balance between the values of practical experience and possible exploitation.

Lavinia remained in Chicago as Superintendent of the Illinois Training School at Cook County Hospital. This was her last supervisory position because she felt that she was a poor supervisor, maintaining that she had no skill in personal relations.

Never financially deprived, Dock traveled to Europe frequently. On July 1, 1899, in England, she became the secretary of the International Council of Nurses, a position she held until 1922. The American Journal of Nursing, August 1933, printed this testimonial of her importance to the Council: “To her rare personality, unceasing work, literary ability, and unique gifts the development of the Council is largely due.” In America, she was a founder of the American Nurses Association and of a Superintendent of Nurses group.

In 1896 Lavinia made a move which undoubtedly changed her thinking and her life. She moved to New York City to work with Lillian Wald at the Henry Street Settlement House at 265 Henry Street which had been established by Wald to administer to the lower East Side. Dock stayed at Henry Street for twenty years. “It was at Henry Street that I really learned to think,” she later said.

From her experiences working with the poor, Lavinia became influenced by anarchist Peter Kropotkin’s theories of social evolution through mutual aid and cooperation. She became increasingly active in seeking
to improve the working conditions of women and helped to organize a women's local of the United Garment Workers of America. In 1909 she picketed in a shirtwaist factory strike. As a founder of the American Nurses Association, she tried to interest this group in working women and their conditions in factories, but the association remained too conservative and gave her little help.

Lavinia proved herself so energetic and committed in these efforts that the well-known anarchist and Russian immigrant Emma Goldman praised her work: "Miss Lillian Wald and Lavinia Dock . . . were among the first American women I met who felt an interest in the economic condition of the masses. They were genuinely concerned with the people of the East Side. My contact with them . . . brought me close to new American types, men and women of ideals, capable of fine, generous deeds . . . they . . . had come from wealthy homes and had completely consecrated themselves to what they considered a great cause."

In addition to her activities at Henry Street, Dock also lectured at the Teachers College of Columbia University, where a post-graduate course for nurses had been established.

Soon, however, Lavinia would be leaving Henry Street to take part in the culminating events in the great campaign for suffrage. Ever since the 1848 Seneca Falls Conference in New York State, women had been attempting, always politely as ladies should, to get the legal vote. In the early twentieth century the main suffrage group was the National Woman's Suffrage Association. Dissatisfied with NAWSA's lack of progress, the Congressional Union For Women Suffrage was formed in 1913 by a group of dissidents led by Alice Paul. By 1917, it was known as the National Women's Party.

This new party supported the Susan B. Anthony amendment which provided that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." The only platform of this newly formed Women's Party was suffrage. The outstanding qualities of this new group were that although small in number, the members were well educated; they were wealthy; they had influential friends; and they were young (Lavinia would become one of the oldest members of the group). They were also totally committed to a militant approach to getting the vote. In this respect they may have been influenced by the belligerent tactics of the English suffragettes. (The Americans chose to be referred to as suffragists.)

Fortunately, events were changing the mores of the country. As World War I continued, women were proving that they could handle a variety of jobs and situations left vacant by men in the armed forces. As Carrie
Chapman Catt said, "The greatest thing that came out of the War was the emancipation of women, for which no man fought."

As early as 1896, Lavinia had shown interest in suffrage when she tried to vote in a New York City election. She was arrested and refused to pay a fine. Police Commissioner Teddy Roosevelt would not jail her. By 1912, Lavinia was fully committed to the suffrage movement. In that year, Rosalie Jones conceived the idea of "suffrage hikes." She decided to organize a hike from New York City to Albany to present a suffrage petition Governor William Sulzer. About two hundred women began the march, but only five completed it—Miss Jones, Ida Craft, Katherine Stiles, Sybil Wiber and . . . Lavinia Dock. The result of this over 170-mile march, from December 16 to December 28, was publicity for the movement but nothing else.

Dock's next known suffrage activity involved working for the 1913 New York City suffrage parade. She organized the East Side Women, who paraded carrying banners that asked for the vote in ten languages. It is not known if Lavinia marched in the 1913 suffrage parade in D.C., where Alice Paul had decided to concentrate the new party's suffrage activity. Definitely Lavinia joined them later after she resigned from Henry Street in 1915. She had become too militant for Wald, who was sympathetic to suffrage but never active. A Wald biographer says that Wald "left that to fierce, warm-hearted little Lavinia L. Dock, brilliant graduate of Bellevue, one of the early family members on Henry Street." 8

Many women's groups appealed in person to President Woodrow Wilson for suffrage. His consistent answer was that it was a state decision. His unchanging position convinced Paul that more overt activities were needed. She therefore decided to picket the White House, placing women holding suffrage banners on the sidewalk. Lavinia became one of the first of these stalwarts.

Since the Clayton Act legalized the right to picket, the women were not breaking a law. All that they did was stand on the pavement at the White House gate. On January 10, 1917, the first picketing began with Lavinia present as one of the oldest. The pickets did not appear on Sundays, but on other days regardless of the weather, they stood silently with their banners. Incredibly, the pickets had to endure a great deal of oral and sometimes even physical abuse from bystanders—mostly men. At least, on June 22, 1917, the police began arrests for "Obstructing the highway." The unfairness of this charge was obvious.

Lavinia Dock was arrested three times in 1917, serving jail terms on two occasions. On June 27, she spent three days in jail for refusing to pay a fine of $25.00. Then on August 16, she and five others were sen-
tenced to Occuquan workhouse in Virginia for 30 days. Great publicity resulted, especially in agitation for their release. Great publicity also exposed the abominable conditions in the prison and the cruel and inhuman treatment the pickets endured.

The Gettysburg Star & Sentinel published several articles of which the following are excerpts: “Saturday, August 25, 1917 . . . Lavinia Dock near Graeffenburg, who has for some months been among the crowd of suffragists pickets at the White House, was one of the six who were given a 30 day workhouse sentence.” “Saturday, September 6, 1917, Mira Lloyd Dock (elder sister of Lavinia) visited there and returned in a mood to condemn the habitually and unsanitary and other conditions in the place of confinement.”

Lavinia’s writings about her experience show her continued interest in helping others. Working to improve conditions in the prisons, she wrote: “the sanitation of the place . . . is calculated permanently to impair the health of the inmates.” She refers to the common drinking cup, the bucket used for sanitation, the weekly shower with one piece of soap shared by all and no soap the rest of the week, the inedible food often wormy or rotten. Dock states that as short terms, the pickets were fearless in complaints hoping to improve or to draw attention to the prison situation for those in longer incarceration. “The other unfortunate inmates had not our fearlessness in criticism, and as they must eat the prison food or starve, for their sakes, we complained as loudly and as often as possible.” It would seem the pickets continued their militancy. Dock also writes about this experience: “The disgrace, the shame of an American administration it is and will remain that American women are first compelled to plead and petition for enfranchisement, and then are sent to jail and to the endurance of conditions such as are here set forth for seeking their rights to citizenship.” Hopefully, the president and the Congress read her words.

Lavinia always thought young! At the age of 59, in the middle of the eventful year of 1917, she wrote the following for the Suffragist. It epitomizes her belief in the young:

“The Young Are At the Gates”

If anyone says to me: “Why the picketing for Suffrage? I should say in reply, “Why the fearless spirit of youth? Why does it exist and make itself manifest?”

Is it not really that our whole social world would be likely to harden and toughen into a dreary mass of conventional negations and forbidding—into hopeless layers of conformity and caste, did
not the irrepressible energy and animation of youth, when joined to the clear-eyed sham-hating intelligence of the young, break up the dull masses and set a new pace for laggards to follow?

What is the potent spirit of youth? Is it not the spirit of revolt, of rebellion against senseless and useless and deadening things? Most of all, against injustice, which is of all stupid things the stupidest?

Such thoughts come to one in looking over the field of the Suffrage campaign and watching the pickets at the White House and at the Capitol, where sit the men who complacently enjoy the rights they deny to the women at their gates. Surely, nothing but the creeping paralysis of mental old age can account for the phenomenon of American men, lawmakers, officials, administrators, and guardians of the peace, who can see nothing in the intrepid young pickets with their banners, asking for bare justice but common obstructors of traffic, nagger-nuisances that are to be abolished by passing stupid laws forbidding and repressing to add to the old junk heap of laws which forbid and repress? Can it be possible that any brain cells not totally crystallized could imagine that giving a stone instead of bread would answer conclusively the demands of the women who, because they are young, fearless, eager, and rebellious, are fighting and winning a cause for all women—even for those who are timid, conventional, and inert?

A fatal error—a losing fight. The old stiff minds must give way. The old selfish minds must go. Obstructive reactionaries must move on. The young are at the gates!

(June 30, 1917, The Suffragist)

After her imprisonment, Lavinia retired to the family home near Caledonia, which the eldest Dock sister Mira had built in 1913. She continued writing for nursing periodicals. The combination of her pacifist World War I posture and her continuing advanced thinking became unpopular with her always conservative colleagues, so she had fewer articles published. An example of her forward thinking was shown in articles written in 1921 in support of Margaret Sanger for "Teaching poor working women what all well-to-do women may learn from reliable authority if they wish it."9

Dock continued her interest in the working woman and job opportunities. In 1926, she wrote "Labor laws for women only are vertical, and like a wall, may be so built as to shut out as many as they shut in. The Woman’s Party supported E R A. It also hardened its resistance to sex-based or, as it was often called, 'protective' labor regulations for women.
Its spokeswomen argued that these laws treated women as invalids and set up the possibility for limiting their economic opportunity.”¹⁰ Familiar sounds?

The other Dock sisters were Episcopalians, but Lavinia had no church affiliation. Lavinia said frequently that “there should be less devotion to an unseen power and more effort to follow the example and teaching of Jesus.” Mary Roberts in the American Journal of Nursing says that “In her devotion to others and in her efforts to make conditions better, she has shown her adherence to the Christian ethics.”¹¹

In looking back over her life, Lavinia Dock said that she had derived her greatest satisfaction from going to jail for suffrage and collaborating with Miss Nutting in the preparation for History of Nursing. She was once described as “Mildly socialistic, ardently pacifist, and a militant suffragist.”¹² Certainly, she helped frame the institution of professional nursing, and by writing its history, did much to establish its identity.

Lavinia died April 18, 1956, from pneumonia following a hip fracture. During her long life, which spanned nearly a century, she had traveled a far path from the pampered, wealthy girl of the Victorian era to the socially conscious, forthright author-suffragist of the twentieth century.
Notes

2. Roberts, p. 176.