

New York City's Suffragist Commissioner:

1914



1915

KBD

Correction's *Katharine Bement Davis*[®]

**A Mini-History
About the First Woman
to Head
A Major NYC Municipal Agency**

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KBD 1: Commissioner Becomes Suffragist 'Star'[©]

Katharine Bement Davis' appointment as New York City Correction Commissioner on Jan. 1, 1914, made news across the country and around the world. For the first time in the city's history a woman had been named to run a major municipal agency. A uniformed force, at that!

Davis had become quite possibly the country's highest ranking female municipal agency executive in terms of department size, status and powers. She had charge of 5,500 inmates in nine city prisons and jails operated by 650 uniformed and civilian employees with a \$2 million annual budget.

Setting: Suffrage Struggle

Her "elevation" to that position was a breathtaking development in the midst of the suffrage struggle then taking place. That issue framed public discussion of her appointment despite Mayor John Purroy Mitchel's disclaimer that he had named her "because she has the training, the experience and point of view that I desire for the Commissioner of Correction."

The experience he cited only heightened the gender focus: Davis' 13 years as superintendent at the state's Bedford Hills reformatory for women. Under her, it had gained national and international recognition for penal reforms.

The *Brooklyn Eagle* hailed the appointment "of a prison executive who has conspicuously made good." But the paper felt obliged to dismiss the notion that the move was a "chivalric tribute" to women's interest in city government. The *New York Times* editorial voiced

the feeling among those familiar with the work of the department that a woman who undertakes it will have need of all the courage and firmness and sound judgment that are a man's part and that are the part of few women.

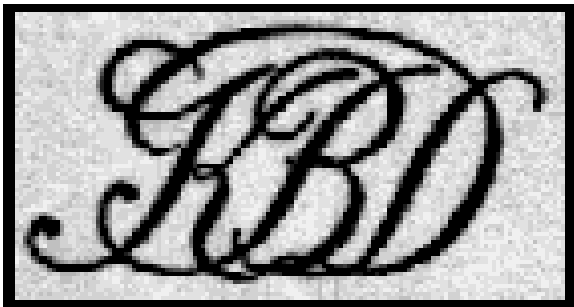
Spokeswomen for the national and state anti-suffrage associations applauded Davis' appointment. They argued it demonstrated voting rights were not necessary in order to have qualified women in high government positions. The Antis' statements ignored the well-known fact that Teddy Roosevelt's pro-suffrage Progressive Party helped mount the successful 1913 mayoral can-

didacy of Mitchel. Since suffragists' support, albeit nonvoting, had helped elect him mayor, his appointing a woman to some post deep within the administration, while noteworthy, would hardly have been surprising. What astounded Mitchel's friends, foes and observers was the then-extraordinarily high level of the post he chose as well as the extraordinary woman with high credentials he picked to fill it.

Newspapers harped upon the gender gap in reporting Davis' first day on the job. One spotlighted the irony that she, a non-voter, swore in "a male voter" as her deputy, Burdette G. Lewis. Another teased about whether she would introduce flowers and curtains into the department's dingy offices on East 20th street. She declined to comment negatively on the headquarters' obvious and widely-known shabbiness. Instead she spoke in positive terms about planning the move into a suite of offices in then new Municipal Building about to open.

Asked, Davis readily acknowledged being a third generation believer in woman's suffrage. Maternal grandmother Rhoda Denison Bement used to tell Katharine about having participated in pre-Civil War abolitionist and temperance activities, and about attending the Women's Convention of 1848 in the Wesleyan Chapel at Seneca Falls, N.Y. The site is now a national women's history shrine as the "birthplace" of the Women's Rights Movement that next year marks its 150th anniversary. There Elizabeth Cady Stanton's call for woman's suffrage was adopted, but only after a strong support from black civil rights activist Frederick Douglass.

Katharine's mother, born Frances Freeman Bement, was 10 years old when the women's rights convention was held in her home town. Frances was the last of eight children born to Rhoda and Jeremy Bement in that Finger Lakes community.



Katharine was proud that she had been given the Bement family name as her own second or middle name. She never dropped it or

reduced it to a middle initial but always spelled it out in her large, sprawling signature. Any official agency letterhead of her own always included the fully-spelled “Bement” (believed derived from “Beaumont”). Indeed, research indicates that only once she allowed it to be initialized on her stationery. That was part of a three-initial monogram on her personal stationery in retirement.

Occasionally, when the printing of a document that included her name was not carried out under her direct control, her middle name might wind up reduced to an initial to conserve space. Sometimes her first name came out as “Catherine.” More often “Katharine” became “Katherine,” an “e” wrongly replacing the second “a.”

1st Woman for Statewide Office on Major Ticket

Davis said that her situation at Bedford Hills had left her little opportunity to be active in the suffrage cause. That changed from Day One as Commissioner. The Woman Suffrage Party invited her to be a guest of honor at a New Year’s reception in its Manhattan headquarters, and she accepted. Carrie Chapman Catt, the movement’s national president, recognized Davis had what today would be called “star quality.” Catt called her “a superwoman.”

Soon Davis was putting in a full day as Commissioner and then appearing in the evening as a featured speaker at suffrage meetings or as a member of a committee organizing suffragist action. On weekends, she would join other women marching in parades or holding rallies for the right to vote. She became a national vice president in the movement, the suffrage party’s borough leader in Manhattan, and the suffragists’ Progressive candidate — with the mayor’s blessing — for delegate-at-large to a State Constitutional Convention.

Thus, Davis appears to have become the first of her gender ever to run for statewide office in New York on a major party ticket before women had gained the right to vote in state or national elections. Having outpolled the Republican presidential ticket nationally and elected a New York City mayor, the Progressive Party was a major party in New York State back then. Its 1914 statewide slate consisted of 15 at-large delegate candidates, including Katharine, and nine candidates for top state office. Its candidate for a seat on the state’s highest bench, the Court of Appeals, won: Samuel Seabury whose later investigations of

city government would lead to the election of fusion reform Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. Also on that 1914 Progressive ticket were gubernatorial candidate Frederick M. Davenport, later four times elected to Congress, and U.S. Senate candidate Bainbridge Colby, later U.S. Secretary of State under Woodrow Wilson.

At a Cooper Union rally for the entire statewide ticket, Davis was introduced by “Colonel” Roosevelt himself. In affectionate deference to his own preference, New York newspapers regularly referred to Teddy Roosevelt as Col. Roosevelt, an allusion to his earlier Rough Rider days. Readers knew “the Colonel” was the former President.

The ticket lineup appeared on the back page of a four-page campaign piece promoting Davis’ candidacy, complete with a hand pointing to the Davis name on the list. The opening phrase of the Davis’ campaign bio on the inside two pages declared: “Katharine Bement Davis — Nominated by the Progressive Party at the request of the Women’s Temporary Committee of the State of New York for Representation in the Constitutional Convention.” The non-partisan committee was chaired by Henry Street Settlement founder and leader in public health nursing, Lillian D. Wald.

The suffragists had mounted Davis’ candidacy to spotlight the denial of voting rights to women. They also promoted other female candidates for the Constitutional Convention but these were either with minor parties and/or for district representation. Davis was the only female candidate for statewide “delegate at large” on a major party ticket.

Helps Found Women’s City Club

Correction Commissioner Davis, undismayed by not winning election (that had not been the prime purpose), joined other forward-looking leaders of New York’s woman suffrage movement founding in July, 1915 an organization planning ahead to when the vote would be won. That organization remains vibrant to this day: the Women’s City Club of New York, whose initial purpose was to prepare women to take an active, informed role in municipal government as voters once that franchise was won.

Other early club leaders included Eleanor Roosevelt, Progressive political strategist Belle Moskowitz and Frances Perkins who would at the U.S. Department of Labor during Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Presidential administration become on the federal level what Davis had been on the New York City level — the

first woman member of the Cabinet. Both Moskowitz and Perkins were married to members of Mayor Mitchel's administration.

In keeping with its broad mandate, the founding members also focused the club's energies on improving city government and public welfare. One of the projects in which Davis, the Women's City Club and other leading women's organizations were involved was Women's Court. That was the name given to the place and process in which women arrested for prostitution and other vice-related activities were charged, arraigned and adjudicated.

Through the efforts of Davis, the Women's City Club, and others, various procedural reforms and improvements in conditions were undertaken. Most proceedings were transferred from night to day sessions. That ended the previous practice of on-the-town, all-night revelers dropping into court to see the parades of arrested streetwalkers. The physical accommodations were upgraded. Segregation of first timers from hardened veterans was arranged. Various probation and social uplift services were offered.

Early League of Women Voters Leader

Katharine was among those suffragists who eventually succeeded in gaining the key breakthrough that signaled inevitable passage for the federal amendment — New York State enfranchisement of women in 1917. By that time, she had become chairperson of the City Parole Commission.

When passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920 successfully ended the national movement for suffrage, Davis (then general secretary of the Rockefeller-funded Bureau of Social Hygiene) was among those who helped Catt launch the National American Woman Suffrage Associations's successor organization: the League of Women Voters.

Katharine became the League's social hygiene committee chairwoman and a district leader. In 1922, a national poll conducted by the LWV named Davis among the "12 greatest living American women."

The suffrage struggle had served to spotlight Davis' appointment, and she put her resulting high visibility at the service of that same cause. Katharine fully played the high-profile part that the larger historical drama had opened up for her when she stepped upon the stage of municipal government. But how did she come to be in that theater of action in the first place?