

### ***KBD* 3: At 30, This College Junior a Senior ©**

Her decade teaching Dunkirk public high schoolers and taking individual college courses whenever she could, earned Davis “advanced placement” at Vassar. While she entered as a junior year student, Katharine was immediately the senior member of the student body. She was a 30-year-old high school science teacher who had worked her way into college. She looked the part. Davis was not into wearing or discussing the latest fashions, which were beyond her budget anyway. Indeed, she made all her own clothes throughout her teaching, college and university years, and even afterwards until “I was able to earn enough money to hire it done.”

Rather than clothing fashions, what captured her interest were matters of science. Since her Rochester Academy days, she had been fascinated with chemistry. At Vassar, she made nutritional chemistry her major. To defray her campus living expenses, she lodged in the college’s astronomical observatory and assisted in its work. Conscientious about her observatory duty, she usually joined her sister students’ evening get-togethers only on nights of poor visibility. She became known as their “cloudy-night friend.”

When she did socialize, Katharine entered into the spirit of the given occasion “with zest and humor,” recalled a former classmate. “A college dance never found her without that article which [was] so rare and so much appreciated at Vassar — a man.” Auction bridge, cooking, reciting spontaneous doggerel and writing light verse for friends were favorite diversions when she stole time from her heavy course load or the telescope.

#### **Reform-Minded Campus**

Vassar was founded in 1861 (the year after Katharine’s birth), arguably the country’s first all-woman full four-year college from inception. By the time Davis entered in 1890, the college was an established center of progressive education for women. A major preoccupation on campus, among faculty and students alike, was the so-called “social reorganization.” Jacob Riis’ powerful photo expose of New York slum life, *How the Other Half Lives*, had just been published. Social reformer Herbert E. Mills headed up



**KBD's Vassar Class of 1892 photo.**

*(Courtesy of Special Collections, Vassar College Libraries, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.)*

training in what was called domestic or sanitary science. Katharine earned Phi Beta Kappa, graduated at the top of the Class of 1892, and delivered a commencement speech entitled, *The Missing Term in the Food Problem*.

the economics department and introduced a course, *Charities and Corrections*. The unyielding suffragist and pacifist, Lucy M Salmon, who would play so pivotal a role in Davis' life, taught history.

In this academic environment, Davis sought to combine her interest in science, her concern for reform and her need for employment. She found her answer in food chemistry and nutritional studies.

Public health programs were opening up career opportunities for women with

#### **KBD 4: Sets Up Model Home at World's Fair<sup>®</sup>**

Davis did in New York City after graduating Vassar what she had done in Dunkirk before entering Vassar — pursue studies on her own while teaching science to high schoolers. Katharine secured a position at the Brooklyn Heights Seminary for Girls. The school, first on Montague Street and later on Pierrepont Street, was founded in 1851. Its long-time principal, Dr. Charles E. West, also originally from western New York, had pioneered a college preparatory curriculum for girls that included math and science subjects previously considered strictly male courses.

By combinations of trolley and horse-drawn bus in those pre-subway system days, Davis would travel from the girls academy across the then 10-year-old Brooklyn Bridge to Columbia University's Barnard College on Madison Ave. near 49th Street. Barnard had been founded as a separate women's college within

the university only three years earlier -- after Columbia College refused to admit women as co-eds. There she studied the chemistry of food. In the midst of teaching and studying, Davis took on yet another major commitment — organizing a workingman’s model home as part of New York State’s display at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

### **The Last Great Fair**

This last great fair of the 19th century, nominally honoring Columbus’ voyages of 400 years prior, actually celebrated America’s transformation from a society of farms and owner-operated businesses at the start of the 1800s to the industrialized, corporate-controlled urban society evident by the 1890s. For the exposition, Dvorak wrote his *New World Symphony* and Scott Joplin wrote his ragtime. Inspired by its “White City,” L. Frank Baum wrote about an Emerald City in his *Wizard of Oz*. The exposition ushered in a new age of consumerism with introduction of brand names — Cream of Wheat, Shredded Wheat, Pabst Beer, Aunt Jemina’s syrup and Juicy Fruit gum. — destined to become as much a part of Americana as the Ferris Wheel, carbonated soda and hamburger, which also were popularized at the fair.

The idea of showing fairgoers a dwelling designed to demonstrate the principles of “domestic science” originated with Vas-sar Prof. Salmon who promoted Katharine to head it. The New York Board of General Managers for the state’s participation in the fair agreed to fund the project, with Davis as director, but stipulated it be “a workingman’s model home.” She became the general contractor, in effect, and oversaw the design, construction, furnishing, heating, food supplying, selection of the live-in family, their daily menu, their clothing, and the accounting of every penny spent. The experiment was intended to show how a family of five (parents, two children and an infant) could live modestly but comfortably on \$500 annual income if correct principles of good nutrition and sanitation were followed. A hard-working laborer might earn close to that amount if steadily employed 60 hours each week throughout the year.

### **Pratt Design, Brooklyn Prices**

Davis went to Frederick B. Pratt, son of Greenpoint oil baron Charles Pratt who founded in Brooklyn the engineering institute



**Women's Building at the Columbia Exposition.** (C.D. Arnold ca. 1893 From Chicago Public Library Special Collection Division)

now bearing his name. The senior Pratt had died two years earlier but the son carried on his father's interest in housing reform. Soon faculty members of Pratt Institute, then in its sixth year, were busy drawing up architectural plans for the two-story frame cottage, 20 feet by 28 feet, to go on a fair lot with 25-foot frontage.

Davis and her Pratt team deliberately kept the structure simple but sound in order to stay within a \$1,000 investment cost of the home that a theoretical owner could then reasonably rent at \$10 a month. That would leave the model tenant family \$380 of its annual income for other living expenses. Katharine quite literally tracked the cost of everything in the house, down to the nails in the floor, the diapers on the baby and the nutritional unit intake of each family member. She comparison-shopped Brooklyn prices versus Chicago's, going with one or the other depending on relative value.

Davis was handed the project March 4, 1893, with May 1 set as the opening for the six-month fair. Within the few months allowed her to prepare, she had the home up, its family in place, hundreds of fairgoers trooping through daily, and her meticulously-kept records posted for inspection. Turning Salmon's idea into reality had been a prodigious undertaking that Davis carried it off with aplomb. Nevertheless, Katharine was under no illusions that frugality alone — even when exercised in accord with “sound domestic science” — answered the pressing social needs of the times. She herself pointed out that her model home budget could make no allowance for old age support, serious sickness, cultural or educational enrichment, religious and community activity, or entertainment. She expressed her own belief in labor organizing to attain fair wages and other social justice. Her little house at the big fair was not meant to solve those larger issues. Its aim was ameliorative — to show that scientifically correct house-keeping could help limited income stretch far enough to make a modest home warm, comfortable and healthy for the frugal family.

## **New Career Path**

The exposition significantly impacted on Davis' life. Moving her off the classroom teaching track, it started her on a new career path, that of an administrator. Her model home accomplishments became widely known. After all, the fair drew a million or more visitors every week, with thousands stopping by Katharine's cottage. As a result, she was offered the position of head worker (administrator) of a settlement house in a Philadelphia district of struggling blacks and Russian immigrants. She could have returned to teaching the daughters of middle class families, in Brooklyn Heights or elsewhere.

Given the economic climate, that might have seemed the safer, wiser course. For despite the fair proclaiming the achievements of American ingenuity and industry, the country was in the throes of a devastating economic depression, unemployment and homelessness were widespread, labor unrest often erupted into violent strikes. Nevertheless, she chose service to the working poor and jobless.

### **Jane Addams' "Vice President"**

In making that choice, she had near at hand in Chicago a ready example of settlement work — Hull House, founded by Jane Addams and Ellen Starr four years earlier. It was an American version of a social reform program developed in London by Octavia Hill and her sisters, with the help of John Ruskin, starting in the mid-1860s. Settlement concerns included housing, sanitation, nutrition, health care, literacy, employment, vocational training, general education, cultural enrichment and moral uplift. With mutual interest in settlement work as the start, Addams and Davis would develop a professional relationship of mutual respect and social reform support prompting one journalist decades later to quip: "If Jane Addams were President [of the United States], Katharine Davis would be her Vice President."

The exposition also introduced Davis to University of Chicago that had begun operating only eight months earlier on a campus adjacent to the fair grounds. Its dean of women students was Prof. Salmon's friend and former Michigan University classmate, Alice Freeman Palmer, wife of Harvard professor and philosopher George Herbert Palmer. As surely as Salmon would have vis-

ited the fair to see how her model home idea had been implemented, she would have visited Palmer with Davis. Although not involved in the New York State model home display, Palmer was one of the “lady managers” for the Chicago exposition. Students and faculty often strolled off the campus and onto the adjoining fairgrounds, just as fair personnel might seek out the quieter campus for relief from the exposition noise. When Katharine would return to the campus four years later as a graduate student, the dean would be Marion Talbot. Nevertheless, the U. of Chicago connection for Davis had been forged at the fair.

### ***KBD* 5: Heads Philadelphia Settlement, Aids DuBois<sup>©</sup>**

The Settlement House operation in Philadelphia was part of a multi-city program begun the year Davis entered Vassar (1890) by it and three other women’s colleges in the Northeast: Smith, Bryn Mawr, and Wellesley, where U. of Chicago Dean Palmer had been president. Within a few years, this College Settlement Association included Harvard’s Radcliffe, Brooklyn’s Packer Institute, Columbia’s Barnard, Pennsylvania Friends-founded Swarthmore, Cornell’s Sage College, and upstate New York’s Wells and Elmira colleges. Students from the colleges would become residents at the settlement houses in New York, Boston, Philadelphia and elsewhere for postgraduate training in social work.

The College Settlement on Philadelphia’s St. Mary’s Street (later renamed Rodman St.), serving a district of poor blacks and Russian immigrants, developed out of a free library project started there in 1884 by Quaker reformer Susan Parrish Wharton. She was kin to Joseph Wharton, the Philadelphia industrialist and philanthropist who three years earlier had established the now world-famous University of Pennsylvania School of Finance and Commerce that bears his name.

Miss Wharton and her cousin Hannah Fox were very active in the Settlement’s activities during Davis’ head residency. Fox and another cousin, Helen Longstreth Parrish, served as incorporation officers for a settlement spin-off organization, the Octavia Hill Association “to improve working class housing conditions” through the purchase, renovation and management of multi-dwellings rented at reduced rates to “deserving tenants.”

## Settlement Spin-off

Davis was at the center of this housing effort, having direct hand in acquisition and remodeling of at least four tenements. Responding to an inquiring letterwriter, she explained:

*As yet there have been no 'model tenements' [newly] built in Phila. though some old ones have been put into sanitary condition, some fairly good smaller ones have been built and an organization has been effected to build others . . . If you are not already familiar with them, you would be interested in the Homes of the London Poor and Essays by Octavia Hill . . . the principles involved in Miss Hill's work seem to us to apply to all times & places.*

But Davis added a wrinkle or two not likely to be found in Octavia's essays. Serving as a kind of general contractor for the Settlement, renovating tenements and developing model housing, she dealt dramatically but effectively with city agency failure to raze a dangerous and dilapidated slum dwelling that had been condemned and long due for demolition. Davis went through the vacant boarding house herself and smashed every window in the place! Embarrassed officials quickly had the windowless-structure torn down.

An in-your-face challenge of a different kind was mounted by the Settlement and a women's civic club when they combined forces to take on the local political machine and fielded two female candidates for election to the school board. Davis and her Municipal League running mate had the satisfaction of knowing they garnered more votes than any previous independent candidates had, helping to deny a majority count to the winners by plurality. But the losers considered the campaign itself a victory because of the heightened community interest engendered in the issues and in the work of the Settlement.

### Davis and W.E.B. DuBois

As head worker, Davis helped Susan Parrish Wharton arrange, through Pennsylvania University and the Wharton School, a landmark study of blacks in urban America. Katharine wrote in the Settlement's annual report that "the investigation into the condition of the colored people of . . . the seventh ward which contains about 10,000 Negroes, nearly one fourth the entire number in the city" would be carried out "by means of house-to-house canvass."



**W. E. B. DuBois**  
(Detail from **Black History Month poster** by Correction Officer Carolyn Tann-Starr.)

Then Katharine gave the researchers, a young Ph. D. from Harvard, W. E. B. DuBois, and Settlement worker Isabel Eaton, the full support of the St. Mary's Street center in carrying out the joint Settlement-Wharton School project. Records indicate DuBois stayed as a guest at the Davis settlement house on at least one occasion. The likelihood is that DuBois and Eaton used the facilities as needed to carry on their work in the neighborhood.

Davis' report continued with a bluntness that was remarkable for its time:

*A promising outgrowth of the acquaintances made . . . in the course of [the] investigation is a League of Colored Mechanics, formed in the spring to promote the interests of colored men employed in the various trades and excluded on account of race prejudices from the Trades Unions. The League meets weekly in the Settlement House.*

A few years later, while at University of Chicago pursuing her own Ph. D., she wrote a scholarly journal review of DuBois' *The Philadelphia Negro*, praising it, and denouncing "the prejudice of whites" and their denial of job and housing opportunities to blacks. To supplement her \$800 annual salary as Settlement director, Katharine taught domestic science and food chemistry courses at the Philadelphia Seminary for girls. While the St. Mary Street post paid little in cash relative to the major responsibilities involved, but it provided opportunity (in 1990s' terminology) "to network" with leading social reformers and philanthropists of the 1890s. Those "contacts" yielded a lifetime of career dividends.

### **Davis Returns to Chicago**

When Davis left the Settlement in the summer of 1897 for graduate studies, the CSA board wrote, "The loss of Miss Davis from Philadelphia is diminished by the fact that she left us to pursue sociological study and fit herself for further Settlement work." She had applied for, and was granted, admission as a doctoral student to University of Chicago. There a Department of Sociology had been launched, the first in America.