

Among Katharine's University of Chicago sociology professors was George Vincent who would come to play a pivotal role in Davis' life later on when he headed the Rockefeller Foundation. He was the son of American Methodist Episcopal bishop John Heyl Vincent, founder of a major movement in adult education that began in 1874 at Chautauqua Lake near Dunkirk, N.Y., where Oscar Davis was raising his family. The Chautauqua Movement began as a summer training program for Sunday school teachers. It evolved into a traveling lecture series and summer school. The Chautauqua concept inspired similar summer schools and extension lectures, secular as well as religious. Dunkirk school leader Oscar Davis became a supporter of a summer school program for his community.

In 1882 at the Chautauqua Institute, William Rainey Harper, professor of Hebrew at the Baptist Union Theological Seminary, Chicago, developed correspondence home-study lessons that he evolved into an extension learning program at U. of Chicago when he became its first president. The charter for the otherwise nonsectarian university — as founded by John D. Rockefeller in the early 1890s — required that one trustee be from the Baptist Theological Union. While living on the U. of Chicago campus, Katharine stayed at Foster Hall headed by Myrna Reynolds, who had been in Vassar's English Department when Davis attended. Foster was the U. of C. residence for women students, any age and at any educational stage. Katharine, then 37, found "this mixture made it very jolly and kept us all young." Davis had selected political economy as her major and sociology, her minor. She later recalled, tongue in cheek, "There were a number of women students in [the sociology] department, but I was alone in my glory in political economy."

Actually her reception in that department was less than glorious. Aware of her Settlement work in the reform spirit of Octavia Hill and other British Christian Socialists, the department chairman J. Laurence Laughlin suspected Davis of being some kind of radical or socialist herself. He was forever finding and announcing evidence of this supposed leaning in her classroom remarks or in her study papers. He'd proclaim: "There it sticks up its head!"

Initially, the male political economics majors made no move to welcome this first female Fellow in the department. "I had rather understood that they had not favored the innovation of a woman in the department," KBD would recall more than a quarter century later. She studied in the poli-eco department off by herself rather than enter uninvited into the adjacent seminar room they used as a study. But one day one of them, Herbert Davenport, later a Cornell professor, came out to her. He suggested she bring her work into the room and join them. "I did," she recalled, "and from then on, I had a beautiful time; there were some awfully nice boys there then."

Davis and Veblen

She thought one of the professors awfully nice too — Thorstein Veblen, the social critic and author of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in which he coined the phrase "conspicuous consumption." While not a "boy," he was only three years older than Davis. They became "great friends." Because she thought of him as "rather shy of women," she felt



Thorstein Veblen

(Photo courtesy of Mark F. Heiman, Networking Services, Carleton College, Northfield, Mn., Veblen's alma mater.)

"flattered" by their friendship and "persuaded him to come to Foster Hall occasionally to meals or to the various simpler functions." Her reminiscences generously made no mention of Veblen's extramarital affairs that cost his jobs at U. of C. and later Stanford. She remained a friend and supporter throughout his brilliant but erratic career. Moody and enigmatic, his satirizing economic and political institutions of his day exposed need for greater government involvement and influenced Progressive Era and New Deal reformers. Veblen was the U. of C. professor from whom Katharine said she:

got the most . . . He was sympathetic and made one think . . . He was the only man in the world that the trustees would dare permit to lecture on socialism, because no one knew when he got through which side he was on . . . We used to have great arguments about the use of words. I though he used too many long words . . . But I was always in favor of words of one syllable.

In an obvious reference to her work as Bedford Hills warden and

city jails Commissioner, Davis said her penchant for short words “was fortunate” because “in my later career it was often necessary that I be able to make myself easily understood.”

Research in Bohemia

As part of her U. of C. graduate work, she studied at the Universities of Berlin and Vienna, supported by a New England Women’s Educational Association fellowship. Davis’ academic performance at Vassar, Barnard and elsewhere certainly warranted her being awarded the scholarship. But her “connection” with the College Settlement Association (CSA) and with Vassar Prof. Lucy Salmon, friend of Alice Freeman Palmer, could not have hurt either. Palmer was a national leader of the Women’s Education Association (WEA). Most of the colleges represented in CSA were also represented in the New England WEA.

Davis’ dissertation research focused on the economic factors impacting farm workers in Bohemia and those who immigrated to Chicago. Bohemia, now the western-most part of the Czech Republic, is a plateau whose principal rivers include the Vltava, better known to music lovers by its German name, the Moldau, title of the famed symphonic poem by Bohemian-born composer Bedrich Smetana (1824-84). A much earlier Bohemian, John Huss, stands in history as arguably the first Protestant leader a century before Martin Luther. Huss’ burning at the stake in 1415 ignited war for two decades in central Europe. Hussites were particularly strong in Bohemia and neighboring Moravia. The religion known in America as the Moravian Church traces its roots back to the Bohemian Brotherhood as the Hussites had come to be known. So do Salem College in N.C. and Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pa.

Agriculture was one of Bohemia’s basic economic pursuits, the chief crops being wheat, rye, and hops. At the time Davis studied the Bohemian farmers both Bohemia and Moravia were mere provinces in the Habsburg Empire.

Rejected Racist View

Davis rejected the arrogant racist view of some Americans that the poverty endured by the Czech peasants and immigrants flowed from in-bred dull-wittedness. She detailed how the “greed” of feudal landowners imposed exploitive child labor and other inhumane working conditions on the peasants, stunting their development, the effects of which lingered long after the formal abolition of servitude.

Katharine, who had a facility for foreign tongues, spoke, read and

understood a number of European languages. During her research, she lived with a Bohemia farm family. Her direct interviews of farm workers and landowners in Bohemia and the immigrants in Chicago; her on-the-scene gathering of statistics; her review of the original hand-written ledgers, account books and public records were groundbreaking techniques in her field at the time. Her readiness to live among the people whose economic conditions she was studying can be seen as an extension of the readiness she had to live among the people of the seventh ward whose needs she sought to serve through Settlement work. Her experiences with the Russian immigrants in Philadelphia helped her relate to the Slavic farmers and immigrants.

On her return to U. of C., Katharine's fellow Fellows teased, "We know where you have been this past year." German, Austrian and Czech food had added 20 pounds, she ruefully recalled.

In *Endless Crusade*, Dr. Ellen Fitzgerald wrote that Dean Marion Talbot began to get a good idea of what was in store as U. of Chicago's first female Ph.Ds approached graduation. Katharine was the first of the four women in Fitzgerald's study to complete her doctoral degree, receiving her doctorate in political economy cum laude in June of 1900 at the age of forty. To the social reform impulse she had brought with her from the Settlement, U. of C. had added the discipline and credentials of a social scientist. That summer, "Doctor" Davis served as head of Foster Hall and prepared for her next career move. It came in the form of a New York State Civil Service exam.

***KBD* 7: Progressive Penology Movement ©**

Josephine Shaw Lowell, the reformer who helped gain passage of the law setting up the New York City Department of Correction (DOC) as a separate city agency, also helped start Davis on the career path that led eventually to Katharine heading DOC. Daughter of abolition activists, Josephine met and married Union soldier Charles Russell while she was doing Civil War relief work. She was widowed at age 20 in 1864 when he died less than a year after they had wed. Thereafter, Josephine worked tirelessly for sundry social causes, including the establishment of schools for blacks in the South. In 1876, she became the first woman commissioner on the State Board of Charities and founded in 1882

the Charity Organization Society. “Friendly visitors” from the society went to the dwellings of the poor with homemaking and child-rearing help, wrote evaluations and made referrals for financial aid. They were the first social case workers.

A major advocate for separating management of charity institutions from that of penal institutions, Lowell also played a leading role in the 1894 election of fusion reform Mayor William L. Strong. At a 1895 hearing by Strong on the legislation to split the Department of Public Charities and Correction, her testimony in support received top billing. With the Mayor’s backing, the separation took place Jan. 1, 1896, when DOC began operating on its own.

Abby Hopper Gibbons

Four years earlier, Lowell and Mrs. Abby Hopper Gibbons, successfully lobbied the New York State Legislature to pass, and Governor Roswell Pettibone Flower to sign, a bill authorizing a reformatory be built in either New York County or Westchester for women, ages 16 to 30. The governor, from whom Flower Fifth Avenue Hospital gets part of its name, appointed a board of managers to oversee the establishment and operation of the facility.

The previous Legislature had passed such a bill, but then-Governor David Bennett Hill vetoed it. Undaunted and in defiance of her 80-plus years, Mrs. Gibbons had again taken the cause into the Capitol’s corridors, chambers and hearing rooms. Daughter of Quaker philanthropist and abolitionist Issac T. Hopper, she had founded on Manhattan’s Lower East Side in 1845 a kind of half-way house for female offenders and named it in his honor. The Hopper family and home continue to this day helping problemed women and their children.

The gallant Mrs. Gibbons, long the head of the Women’s Prison Association of New York (WPANY), died within a year of the reformatory bill’s enactment. Among the last things she did was promote Miss Alice Standford, of Ossining and later Pelham, for the reformatory board appointment that failing health had forced the octogenarian to decline for herself. Also a WPANY leader, Lowell too promoted Miss Standford, daughter of Militia Major General Lyman Standford, for the managers board.

‘A Reformatory, Not a Prison’

Mrs. Gibbon’s last words, according to her friend Miss Standford, were, “Be sure, Alice, thee make it a Reformatory and

not a Prison.” She expressed the same sentiment to all the managers in what likely was her last letter to the board: “A reformatory pure and simple is my aim. The word ‘prison,’ pray keep in the background. Criminals are made what they are by association and treatment. Let us turn over a new leaf and remember that they are human.”

The distinction between reformatory and prison that Mrs. Gibbons insisted upon was more pronounced in her time than in ours when facilities called reformatories seem identical to those called prisons. Establishment of correctional facilities for women, emergence of the reformatory movement and increasing dominance of Progressive principles in American penology were lines of historical development that converged at the institution that Gibbons and Lowell helped found in northern Westchester.

Penitentiaries in the early 1800s — whether the solitary-work kind as at Cherry Hill, Pa., or the congregate-work kind as at Auburn, N.Y. — also housed women inmates. So did the city’s Bellevue Penitentiary. Arguably the first separate women’s correctional facility in America was Mount Pleasant Female Prison in Ossining that opened in 1839, with what was probably the nation’s first nursery behind bars. Situated on a hill overlooking the Hudson, this walled-in Doric-style structure was just across the road from Sing Sing. Administratively, it was part of that complex but enjoyed considerable autonomy under the chief matrons who handled its day-to-day management. Its inmate housing reflected Sing Sing design on a smaller scale (three tiers of 24 cells each).

However, Chief Matron Eliza M. Farnham during her 1844-47 tenure introduced departures from the Auburn-like regime followed across the road. She allowed periods of low-voice talking among inmates whose good behavior earned this limited right to converse. She introduced daily lessons in history, geography, astronomy, and physiology; made available classic novels for inmate in-cell reading; permitted music, flowers and visitors to lessen the institutional grimness. Overcrowding to nearly twice its capacity forced Mount Pleasant’s closing as a female prison in 1877. County and city jails were then mandated to keep women sentenced to incarceration, both felony and misdemeanor terms.

Even Before Elmira

A year earlier, Elmira Reformatory opened under the innovative career penologist Zebulon Brockway who had managed institutions in Albany, Rochester and Detroit. While running the Michigan prison in the 1860s, he set up a kind of female inmate annex modeled after a Lancaster, Ma., home for delinquent girls that he had visited. Like the Massachusetts girls' shelter, Brockway's female annex emphasized classifying and housing the inmates in "family" groups, provided incentives to induce learning and obedience, stressed domestic education, and hired higher calibre employees who might also serve as role models.

Brockway promoted his House of Shelter reforms, for male as well as female inmates, during the 1870 convention of the newly-formed National Prison Association in Cincinnati. It issued a Declaration of Principles that through succeeding decades took on the aura of sacred creed for penologists. The list of Progressive principles included inmate reformation as the main penal purpose, inmate classification based upon prison behavior, incentives to encourage good behavior, and indeterminate sentencing with early release being among the incentives. Although overcrowding at the main prison caused this House of Shelter to close in 1874, it had served as the birthplace of the reformatory movement in America. The distinction of being the first all-reformatory facility (that is, not an annex) generally goes to Brockway's later and much larger institution, the mostly male reformatory that opened at Elmira, N.Y., two years after the Detroit House of Shelter annex closed. At Elmira, first-time felons 16 to 30 years ago were given opportunity to earn early release through behavior that reflected their "reformation" resulting from participation in the educational and moral uplift programs.

More than a decade would elapse before the first all-female reformatory would open in New York: the House of Refuge at Hudson, not far from Massachusetts' Berkshires. Five years later, a second such facility opened: the Western House of Refuge in Albion, about midway between Rochester and Buffalo. Gibbons and Lowell played roles in establishing both institutions, but the third women's reformatory that they succeeded in having built would outshine the earlier two and become a national and inter-

national model of penal reform for both male and female inmates.

The law setting up New York's third female reformatory required at least two women managers. The other woman originally appointed was Aria Huntington of Syracuse, daughter of Bishop Huntington of Central New York. David N. Carvalho of New York City, John Barry of Mt. Vernon, and Samuel William Johnson of Rye completed the first board. With three of the five managers from Westchester (Standford, Barry, Johnson) and only one from New York City (Carvalho), the board decision to seek a site in a still-rural section of the increasingly suburbanized county to the north of the city came as little surprise.

Bedford Welcomed Reformatory

Residents of Bedford Station on the Harlem Railway line appeared to welcome the news that one of its citizens, James Cromwell, had sold about 110 acres northeast of the community to the state to build a women's reformatory. The price was \$10,000. They saw the site selection as "speaking well for Bedford" and boosting the local economy with employment, trade and workers. But construction dragged on, costs ran over projections, appropriations were delayed. After seven years, the facility was still not ready to open.

In 1899, Lowell herself became a member of managers board and tried to move the work forward to completion. The managers' mandate called for them to appoint a superintendent upon completion of construction, but that didn't stop Lowell from looking for warden candidates well in advance of the buildings being finished.

***KBD* 8: Bedford's First Superintendent ©**

In March of 1900, Lowell wrote University of Chicago's Dean of Women Marion Talbot if she could recommend someone. Talbot did: Davis. Lowell contacted her, was impressed, and encouraged Katharine to go to Albany and take the Civil Service exam for the position. Davis did, passed easily and was appointed that September.

At first glance, the idea that the holder of a doctorate in political economy would seek and be accepted for the post of reformatory warden seems strange. But when the background of this particular Ph.D. recipient is considered, the idea does not seem so strange at all.

Not So Strange a Choice

The major emphasis at reformatories, distinguishing them from prisons, was educational. Davis had worked as a teacher, full or part time, for about 15 years. She let the managers know she intended to run the place as an educational institution, otherwise she would not be interested in the position.

The stated goal of such facilities was the personal reformation of inmates for return to society. For four years Katharine had headed the Philadelphia settlement house trying to help poor Russian immigrants and migrant blacks from the South move from society's margins into its mainstream through their personal reorientation; that is, the immigrants' Americanization and the migrants' urbanization. Personal reorientation and personal reformation have similarities.

The long-drawn-out construction of the facility's more than half dozen buildings resulted in the earlier-built structures needing repairs by the time later ones were erected. Therefore, the warden needed to know about construction, renovation and building repairs as well as know about managing group residences. Her Chicago world's fair model home project, her housing work and settlement house management in Philadelphia, and her Foster Hall supervision in Chicago equipped her to take on related duties as reformatory superintendent. Even her needle skills from years of sewing virtually all her own clothes would come in handy when she set up sewing as one of the main industries at the reformatory.

Her Progressive views in penology and education were evident in an interview granted to a *Tribune* reporter in advance of the first inmate arrivals. At the time, Davis was living near the reformatory's hilly campus while daily supervising its construction, renovations and furnishing.

Every girl will be trained to be self-sufficient. This is the only means for securing lasting reformation. All will receive instruction in cookery, sewing, plain and fancy laundry and general household work. Outdoor life is expected to do a great deal for the moral and physical regeneration of the girls. There will be greenhouse work, market and vegetable gardening, the raising of small fruit, and recreational games. Matrons are to be women

of culture and character [who] in the cottages will associate with the girls at their work, eat at the table with them and sit with them in the evening. Each girl will be made to understand her standing will depend, not on her past record, but wholly on her conduct while here.

'Make a Name in Service to Society'



**Dr. KBD in Chicago
cap & gown.**

Schooling in the academic subjects was to follow, so far as applicable in a reformatory, the educational principles of Dr. John Dewey, then at the University of Chicago. Katharine shrewdly used the interview to promote applications for instructor openings. In the reporter's paraphrase of KBD's pitch for applicants, the reformatory offered "a fine opportunity for some able and ambitious college graduate to do society a service and at the same time make a name for herself as a teacher." Doing society a service while making a name for

oneself was a career advancement formula on which Davis could speak with authority. Certainly both able and ambitious, she applied that formula throughout her own professional life.

On May 11, 1901, the Bedford reformatory officially opened. In addition to a central administration building, the rolling campus included a reception hall, four "cottages," a laundry building, a powerhouse, a gate house and a stable (remember this was not yet the age of the auto). One wing of the reception hall resembled the traditional prison: three tiers of 24 cells each. The other wing was remodeled into rooms accommodating 42 inmates.

The cottages were large group residences accommodating 28 inmates each. Stanford Hall cottage, which included a nursery, housed the inmates with babies of up to 2 years of age, married women, and single women over 21 who had not yet "earned" promotion to Huntington Hall, a kind of honor cottage for those over 21. Gibbons Hall cottage represented a step up and a step out for those under 21 housed in the reception hall. Lowell Hall cottage was the honors home for the best behaved of the adolescents. Each cottage had a garden and its own kitchen where the inmates cooked their "family" meals under matron supervision.

'No Bars, No Walls, No Guards'

Davis had vowed to the *Tribune* in the spring of 1901, "The least possible restraint will be exercised. There will be no bars except in the reception house. Neither will there be any prison wall — only a fence of wire netting which, being nearly invisible, will not give a constant sense of being shut in. There will be no uniform, no marching to and fro in squads, few rules." A dozen years later a *Times* writer visited the Bedford reformatory. His description of it demonstrated that Davis had been true to her word given at the start. He wrote:

At the station were two donkeys, crated, waiting to be taken up to the reformatory, to become draught animals in the service of the inmates who do all the work on a great farm, even carrying on a good part of the present building operations. As the horse-drawn vehicle which carried me approached the nested buildings, we met other donkeys drawing carts laden with farm produce . . . The drivers were the [inmate] farmers, looking healthy and well pleased with life . . . I saw no armed guards on patrol; in fact no guards at all.

Years of erratic funding by the legislature had resulted in the reformatory campus needing, even when it opened, various other structures, road work, sidewalks, and general landscaping. Just as she had refused to let bureaucratic delay stop her Philadelphia settlement housing projects, Davis did not let it stop her Bedford program. She refused to be discouraged when her officers laughed at her plans to have the inmates clear acreage for farming, grade the hilly terrain for lawns, and lay sidewalks, roadways and foundations. She personally led the inmates in mixing concrete; pouring foundations, walks and roads; leveling the land.

A typical instance arose in 1905 when Governor Benjamin Baker Odell Jr. vetoed \$1,500 for various improvements to the Bedford Station facility, later known as Bedford Hills. Undeterred, Davis organized the inmates to do the work themselves, including embankment grading. Davis later recalled:

Our steward said it [was like] trying to plow with a team of cats . . . It could be done if you could get enough cats and if you could make them all pull together. I succeeded in getting my cats to pull together and they filled, graded and seeded the whole bank.

Speaks Up for 'Woman Side'

Davis' employment of female inmates in outdoor projects not traditionally thought of as "women's work" was controversial but she persisted. She wanted her charges to have fresh air and sunlight, build up their physical strength, feel pride of accomplishment, and develop what today would be termed an attitude of self-empowerment. She argued that women inmates needed programs to build their physical, mental and moral fibre because, when returned to the outside world, "they are going to have a harder fight" to stay straight than male inmates due to fewer opportunities open to women for honest work at decent pay. The disparities in job opportunities and wage scales between men and women were subjects Davis spotlighted throughout her career: in settlement house research, in her doctoral studies, in her writings for learned journals and in her talks at meetings of prison professionals.

For many women leaving the reformatory, domestic work offered the only avenue of employment. Davis helped several find "situations" with families, some nearby. Westchester historians recall area households that had "taken in girls from Bedford" as servants who "stayed on" for generations, becoming virtual members of those families themselves.

As her years at Bedford passed, Davis became well known among American and European penologists, often attending and sometimes addressing their conferences, usually stressing staff needs in her remarks. At a 1906 American Prison Association meeting, she wryly observed:

Most of the speakers have talked about men prisoners . . . I suppose that is because most of the speakers know more about men than about women. I do not profess to know anything about men, but I do know something about women, and you will pardon me if I confine myself to the woman side of the question.

While she accepted that hereditary factors help explain criminal behavior among some women with family histories of mental disorders, she held to the Progressives' view that the larger responsibility lay with industrial society itself having victimized these women first by failing to provide them with the kind of educational and job opportunities needed for them to live decently in urbanized America. She rejected the racist and nativist views of those eugenicists who saw criminality as a genetic trait among immigrants and African Americans.