

## ***KBD* 10: Davis Organizes Quake Victims' Self-Help**

Katharine had taken a long-postponed, much-needed vacation away from Bedford and was in the resort town of Siracusa (Syracuse), Sicily Dec. 28, 1908, when a major earthquake hit the nearby Messina region. Most vacationers packed their bags and fled but Davis did just the opposite. She unpacked all her garments that could be ripped into bandages, rushed with them to the nearest medical facility and began helping the injured people who were brought in or straggled in from devastated areas.

After long service in the hospital, she took a break but saw on the streets a social problem going unaddressed. Hundreds of quake refugees were wandering about homeless, with no shoes and no work, with little clothing and less hope. Without portfolio, she persuaded the mayor to open a vacant building and to get her sewing machines. Davis recruited homeless women to sew simple clothing for themselves and other refugees. She organized a group of cobblers to make shoes. At first, Davis paid the seamstresses and shoemakers modest wages out of pocket. Similarly, she set up work gangs of adult male refugees repairing and building roads and simple houses. Not only were clothes, shoes, shelter and roads needed on an emergency basis, but the quake victims needed purposeful activity to prevent their distress turning into paralyzing depression undermining their will to recover.

When her own funds ran out, she collected contributions from the few remaining Americans and from friends abroad. For months, she ran a vast emergency enterprise of employment, relief and reconstruction. She directed factories and work gangs, developed housing, and helped rebuild roads. Eventually, the American Red Cross deputized her and underwrote her quake relief/work program.

### **King, President, Pope Hail Her**

The mayor literally turned over his office quarters to her. Local officials held in awe this little lady who one minute could supervise assembly-line sewing and the next minute direct mixing concrete, who could organize into self-help the people of a land and language other than her own, and who brought them back to life from the listlessness into which disaster had stunned

them. She arranged for the operation to continue after her return to the U.S. where President Taft made a presentation citing her earthquake relief labors. Before Davis left Italy, Pope Pious X personally thanked her. Son of a cobbler, His Holiness could appreciate the wisdom of her decision to include shoemaking among the relief industries she set up with the quake victims.

In advance of the rare private audience in the Vatican, she went to a beautician who insisted Katharine's hair be "marcelled," despite objections from Davis who never had her hair done in that wavy style. In writing years later about her special interview with the Pope, she recalled the big fuss in the beauty parlor about that once-in-a-lifetime marcel wave. "[In meeting Pious X] I wore a black lace scarf over my head as provide by pontifical etiquette but I hope the Pope noticed the beautiful waves as I knelt down to kiss his ring." Then she added parenthetically that she was just joking. Perhaps she realized someone might miss that she was poking fun at herself for the much-to-do about styling hair that got covered over anyway.

Other honors came from King Victor Emmanuel, the Italian Red Cross and American Red Cross. A series of roads she helped build in Sicily was named for her.

## ***KBD* 11: City Service -- 1914 & 1915: Correction ©**

This then was the 53-year-old woman whom New York City's youngest mayor up to that time, 34-year-old John Purroy Mitchel, picked to head Correction, thereby breaking the City Hall cabinet gender barrier. Her earthquake relief exploits had given her name recognition with the general public. Her long tenure at Bedford had made the appointee well known to the city's judges, police, prosecutors, defense bar, newspapers, and social work leaders. Even before being offered the city post, she had been involved with many of them on such projects as planning a decent city jail for women.

Her reformatory innovations had also won her a national and international reputation as well as a network of contacts among penologists, reformers, social scientists, and philanthropists. The Prison Association of New York had declared that, "Under its superintendent, Dr. Katharine Bement Davis, the reformatory is becoming

perhaps the most scientific institution of its kind in the world.”

Also making the city’s establishment even more aware of Davis was a 1913 book she helped publish detailing prostitution’s corrupting influence on the city’s government, law enforcement, and justice system. The study by a professional corruption investigator had been underwritten by the Bureau of Social Hygiene that Rockefeller, Davis and others founded a few years earlier. The book, *Commercialized Prostitution in New York City*, included a chapter contributed by Davis about 650 prostitutes studied at Bedford. Again she rejected racist and nativist views blaming blacks and foreigners for prostitution. Her research showed more than 60 percent of the prostitutes were white, native-born Americans. Women not born in the U.S. accounted for 24 percent; African-Americans, for 13 percent. Unemployment, under-employment and low wages for women were cited as major factors. Background checks showed a significant number had family histories that included alcoholism, sexually transmitted diseases, insanity and tuberculosis.

Davis was known to a number of people whom Mitchel would consult concerning appointments and related matters. Mitchel conferred with Rockefeller Jr. on offering the post to Davis while Katharine consulted him on whether to accept it. Mitchel’s own service as president of the city Board of Aldermen had made him aware of Bedford Hills as the state facility in Westchester where many New York City women were sent for violating laws, including some that the Aldermen had roles in enacting. The last fusion reform mayor prior to Mitchel had been Seth Low. His mayoral term had coincided with the opening of the Bedford Hills facility whose inmates came mostly from New York City. Low had been Columbia College president at the time it affiliated with Barnard College when Davis took courses there traveling from Brooklyn Heights where she taught. A former mayor of Brooklyn, Low later had a home in Bedford Hills to which he retired after quitting Columbia in 1914.

Katharine was known also to several leaders in the Progressive Party that had helped get Mitchel elected. These included one of its chief national organizers, Frances Kellor who had pursued graduate sociological studies at Chicago University while

Davis was there. Kellor was among the women, from different parties, who came together to promote woman suffrage by “nominating” female candidates for the parties to run for State Constitutional Convention seats, either as district delegates or as statewide delegates-at-large. Davis was the only suffragist nominee selected by a major party to run statewide as one of its 12 delegate-at-large candidates. Her placement on the Progressives’ 1914 slate appears to establish Davis as the first woman to run for New York statewide office on a major party ticket before women had won the right to vote.

### **‘An Entirely New Order’**

Some members of the general public not fully aware of her background may have expected her to serve simply as a female figurehead deferring to the male commanders in the Correction Department. Anyone who had that mistaken notion soon discarded it. Davis demonstrated from her first day at DOC that she would be a hands-on, take-charge, no-nonsense Commissioner. A *Times* reporter covering her activities that day noted, “She took charge of everything about her, including her long-time friend, ex-Commissioner Patrick Whitney. Mr. Whitney started to show his successor over the building, but as soon as she found where the Commissioner’s desk was she settled down and was a very busy woman for the rest of day.”

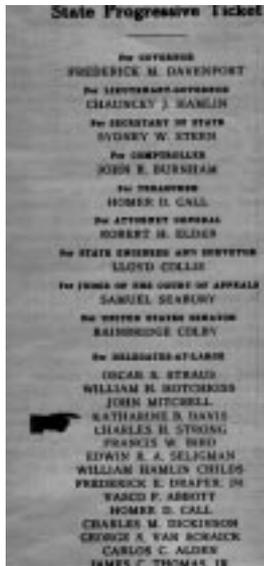
During her two years as Commissioner, she introduced operational and management changes transforming the agency from what sometimes seemed a loose confederation of local facilities into a centrally-run, administratively-unified department. Perhaps no example better illustrates Davis’ tight-ship style than her reaction to a draft document she was handed shortly after becoming DOC Commissioner Jan. 1, 1914. She was given the annual report prepared for the year ending Dec. 31, 1913. The draft followed the standard form of previous DOC annual reports. Its 60 pages were simply a collection of separate reports by individual wardens and by the department’s accountant and other officials, covered by a single paragraph transmittal letter from the Commissioner to the Mayor. But in her letter of transmittal, Katharine sounded a wake-up call:

*This report as now rendered comprises a collection of independent reports . . . , apparently compiled without coordination either of form of presentation, or of contents. As, however, I pos-*



**KBD constitutional delegate campaign photo and ticket.**

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



*essed no jurisdiction over the operation of the department in the year 1913, I present this report without comment other than to direct attention to this incoordination and to the fact that the report for the year 1914 will follow an entirely new order of presentation. I also call attention to the fact that the statistics relating to prisoners in this 1913 report contain a considerable amount of repetitional information, which tends to destroy the value of the figures presented as statistics.*

Some “without comment other than . . .”!

True to her word, the two annual reports prepared at her direction reflected “an entirely new order,” not merely of presentation, but also of agency operation and organization. Her two reports ran at least three times as many pages, were focused on the department as whole, and included statistical analysis, strategic planning, and reports of studies by outside experts conducted at her invitation. Her own preface to the detailed report ran several pages. They summarized and analyzed the facts and figures, reviewed current conditions, projected future needs and set forth plans and programs to address current and future needs. Another innovation was liberal use of illustrations — bar graphs and pie charts — and photos, things never before appearing in DOC annual reports.

As historical sources, annual reports have their uses and limitations, whether originated with public agencies or private corporations. Yet even discounting the public relations aspect built into virtually all annual reports, those done under Davis’ direction are so dramatically different when compared with those preceding hers, they evidence a substantive change in management calibre and direction, not merely cosmetic alteration of presentation. The information was so thoroughly integrated to convey a picture of the agency as a whole, rather than a series of snapshots of constituent parts, that the reports constitute credible testimony to the vision of the department Davis left as her im-

print.

A historical truism about the Civil War holds that before the conflict, “United States” was considered a plural noun and that after the war, the noun became singular. In somewhat the same sense, Davis’ tenure represented such a departure from the past that her two years can be said to mark the emergence of the Department as a whole into the modern era. Two decades earlier the city’s inmate-related facilities had been part of the Department of Public Charities and Correction (DOPCC) but, under urging from reformers such as Josephine Shaw Lowell, the city and state divided that dual agency into two separate agencies. The laws setting up the separation specified which facilities under DOPCC came under which separate new agency, DOC or DOPC. This facility-focus continued in the early DOC years. With Davis, the focus clearly shifts to the department as a whole. The seeds for that development may have been planted, and the tender shoots tended, prior to her arrival but she was the Commissioner who brought the development to fruition.

### **Zebras and Bedticking**

Among the reforms for which she fought, often victoriously, were classification of prisoners, segregation of inmate types, a coherent system of inmate record keeping, and inmate blood testing. Perhaps her best remembered reform was the abolition of prison stripe clothing, saying it undermined efforts to raise inmate self-respect. An incident that happened in connection with the clothing change reflects aspects of Katharine’s character — quick with wit and quip, long on thoughtful analysis, decisive in action.

On Jan. 2, 1924, Davis and her deputy, Burdette Lewis, accompanied by a group of reporters covering the city’s first woman executive commissioner on her early rounds, ferried across to Blackwell’s to inspect the Penitentiary. As they approached the island’s docking area, men in black and gray striped clothing could be seen unloading a coal barge there. Adopting what one biographer described as a “characteristic serio-comic mien,” Davis spontaneously recited to the person standing next to her on the boat:

*When first he saw the zebra,  
The donkey wagged his tail.  
"Good gracious," was his comment,  
That mule has been in jail.*

Davis turned quite serious and told those with her that she believed strongly in the psychological impact clothing had on their wearers; that people always had more self-respect when wearing their best. “Half the degradation and sullenness of prisoners is a result of their hideous stripes and shapeless garments. I shall order the women prisoners’ clothes be made out of neat, pretty gingham. You can’t reform a woman who is wearing bedticking.” She indicated that the equivalent held true for male inmates in stripes. Not very many days later newspapers were announcing the Commissioner was abolishing convict stripes as soon she could “get rid of 18,000 yards of stripes.” Similarly, she halted public sightseeing tours at the Tombs, calling it degrading for inmates “to be gazed upon like wild beasts in cages.”

## ***KBD* 12: Cuts Drug Trafficking, Quells Rioting ©**

Seeking a solid basis for action, the new Commissioner had two aides get themselves arrested for “joyriding” and held in the Tombs three weeks. Their experiences provided the grounds for her to initiate steps that shook up the department and the city. Her targets: corruption and favoritism. The undercovers had been able to “buy” the best cells and food. They had witnessed trafficking in, and smuggling of, drugs and liquor.

Davis ordered all prisoners be treated equally, whether wealthy or poor. “Luxury” accommodations for inmate elites were abolished. No longer could food and tobacco be brought in by visitors; they had become drug smuggling channels. The newspapers announced in amazement that the city’s most infamous and affluent crooks were being consigned to “common cells by Miss Davis.” Wrote one daily: “If this be feminism, let us have more of it.”

She herself led unannounced night raids on facilities, surprising keepers and inmates alike, confiscating contraband and exposing various irregularities.

### **Quells Riot Without Parasol**

Her success in reducing the amount of drugs and other contraband getting to inmates was one of the causal factors in the Blackwell’s penitentiary riot that erupted July 8th, 1914. Other factors cited later were the economic depression then prevailing, the rise of the radical Industrial Workers of World, and the ineptitude of

a warden at a critical moment. It all began with a horse's feeding bag...

The Davis contraband crackdown drove some inmates to desperate measures to have drugs smuggled to them. A few wrote letters that an inmate hid in the feeding bag of a horse used to haul the cart of a vender making a delivery. The letters to relatives and friends urged new ways be found to get the drugs into the facility. Whatever past practice may have given the convicts hope that letters put into the feeding bag could reach those addressed is not clear. But this time a keeper, who had become suspicious of the inmate hanging around the horse, found the letters and sent them to Davis. When that keeper next appeared in the inmate mess hall, the convicts whose efforts he had frustrated began hissing. The general area from which the hissing had come was known. The warden demanded to know who had started it. When no one spoke up, the warden punished all the men at the two tables in the suspect zone, the hissers and non-hissers alike. They were locked in their cells the rest of the day.

At the time, the facility held a number of Wobblies as I.W.W. members were known. Their advocacy of overthrowing the country's capitalistic structure to be replaced by a workers-run society, and their activities of economic disruption to achieve that goal, had figured in their arrests and incarcerations. The Wobblies seized upon what they characterized as the unjust punishment of the men from the suspect tables. In one shop, an IWWer — with a gift for oratory — led his fellow inmates in revolt, smashing machines and slashing motor belts. With that, a full-scale riot broke out.

Commissioner Davis was returning to the city by boat from the Belmont family's Newport estate, where she had attended a Political Equality Association meeting, when she heard the rioters' sounds as the vessel steamed past Blackwell's. Straight away, she headed to the scene without waiting to change from social finery to office wear. That prompted a popular image of the Lady Commissioner quelling the riot at the point of her parasol. She carried no parasol. But quell the riot she did, with a display of courage and sagacity that won her the respect of inmates, staff, press and public. Davis walked through the cellblocks, talked with the prisoners, told them to name representatives to meet with her and set up her office in the jail until calm was completely restored. Katharine even preached at the religious services of the various faiths at their next days



**Photo of Blackwell's Island facilities from annual report under Davis.**

of observance.

To hear the cases against the riot ringleaders, Davis had the magistrate come to Blackwell's rather than transport them to court. As the *Tribune* reported:

*The firm hand of Commissioner Davis manifested itself again on Blackwell's Island . . . The new Commissioner made a departure in having the trials on the island . . . there in the warden's office, court was held. It was all perfectly legal. The Commissioner took no part in the proceedings. She simply sat by and watched.*

A State Prison Commission report on the riot, issued months later, declared, "The Commissioner of Correction took hold of the situation with a firm hand and deserves commendation for the energy, justice, and ability with which she handled it."

#### **Katharine and the Keepers**

At the city prison keepers' annual dinner in the Hotel Breslin Feb. 3, 1915, Commissioner Davis was the guest of honor. She remarked, as quoted by the *Tribune*:

*"The riots in the [Blackwell's] penitentiary were perhaps a good thing after all. They cleared the air like a thunderstorm. They convinced everybody in the beginning that to have a woman commissioner didn't mean that discipline was going to be lax. I want to take this opportunity to thank the keepers for the way they stood by the wardens in those trying days."*

Then Davis told a story about firing a keeper, the kind of incident one might first think a Commissioner would wish to be silent about at a keepers' social event because it could be so easily misinterpreted as threatening. But seeking safety in silence was not the Davis style. She knew the keepers, under previous unnamed administrations, had experienced the intrusion of partisan politics into their professional domain, placing their job security at risk. The point of her story was reassurance from her that she would not permit that to happen while she was the helm. Davis knew the men would understand exactly what she was saying and would welcome hearing it. They recognized her frankness as a sign of

respect for them and it earned her their respect in return. She told them:

*We hope to raise the salaries of keepers, too, so as to attract the best type of men into the profession. These may be assured that the only thing that will count in holding the position will be fitness.*

*The other day it was necessary for me to discharge a keeper. Pretty soon one of my friends came dashing in, 'You have dismissed a fellow Progressive,' she said. 'I don't know that he was Progressive, but I do know that he was drunk,' I answered. I don't think a man's politics are any of my business.*

Davis conducted a survey of DOC personnel and discovered orderlies and helpers performing the duties of officers. In her departmental reorganization, she replaced as many as possible of the orderlies and helpers with keepers from civil service lists. She sought higher pay and better working conditions for the keepers, and often spoke directly with them in the down-to-earth manner that was her style. She was highly regarded by the members of the uniformed force, and several kept in touch with her long after she had moved on to other tasks, and even into retirement.

Writing in the April, 1932, issue of *On Guard*, the monthly published by the Prison Keepers Council, Keeper Joseph P. Tallon recalled:

*The Hon. Katharine B. Davis, when Commissioner, found that instead of keepers, the majority of officers were orderlies and helpers receiving \$20 or \$40 per month salary. Immediately there was a re-organization, replacing [them] so far as possible with keepers from the Civil Service lists [in] those positions [and thereby] cleaning out [from] the department this type of employee, knowing that labor like all other commodities has a standard of value and [that] you only get what you pay for.*

*Many of you can remember Commissioner Davis addressing the keepers' meetings, explaining what was expected of the keepers, [announcing] the first boost in salary. Unfortunately for the keepers before she had time to complete those changes advocated, Commissioner Davis was appointed Parole Commissioner. [She passed] on to greater honors and lately to a well-earned rest that she is now enjoying in sunny California. By wishing you the best of health and a long life, I am sure that I am expressing the sentiment of all of the men in our department who knew you as our Commissioner.*