

After fusion reform Mayor Mitchel left office, having lost the 1917 mayoralty to John Hylan, Davis also left city service. She joined the Bureau of Social Hygiene in a full-time paid capacity.

While superintendent of Bedford Hills reformatory, she had a continuing relationship with the bureau that she, John D. Rockefeller Jr. and others founded in 1911. Throughout her four years of city service in the Mitchel administration, Katharine had maintained ties with the bureau and its Bedford inmate research and screening lab. Now for the first time in her association with the bureau, Davis would become a full-time salaried employee. She and JDR Jr. agreed on a 10-year contract for her to serve as its general secretary; in effect, its executive director.

Her Mayor Dies in WWI Training

Meanwhile, Mitchel joined the Army aviation corps to fight in World War I but on July 6, 1918, he fell 500 feet to his death in a training plane accident. Putting party politics aside, the city united to mourn the young ex-mayor. A three-quarter-acre park in upper Manhattan's Washington Heights, across the street from the Audubon Business and Technology Center of Columbia University, is named Mitchel Square in his memory. Mitchel was an 1899 graduate of Columbia College. The square's centerpiece is the Washington Heights-Inwood War Memorial, a bronze and granite group sculpted and donated by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Mitchel is also memorialized by a monument at 90th Street and Fifth Avenue in Central Park.

Five years after graduating New York Law School in 1901, Mitchel became widely known as a result of leading investigations into the dealings of the Manhattan and Bronx Borough Presidents, both of whom were consequently ousted from office. The high standards of integrity that marked his political career also characterized his administration that historians regard as one of the most innovative. Wrote Davis in her biographical sketch, *Three Score Years and 10*, warning potential readers not to expect juicy tidbits about personages in her public life of nearly four decades:

You will find no scandals here. Whatever informalities, shall we say, I personally knew of my own knowledge when I was in public life were so mild as compared with what is happening now-

days that they probably would arouse no interest whatsoever. In any case, I never saw nor heard of anything that smacked of a scandal which touched Mayor Mitchel or any of his Cabinet. School teacher, settlement worker, institution superintendent, prison official, general secretary of one of the Rockefeller organizations — this has been my life. . . the life of a busy woman . .

During WWI, Davis chaired the Social Hygiene Division women's section of the federal Commission on Training Camp Activities. She wrote and appeared in a film, shown at military boot camps and nearby communities, warning against "social diseases" from unsafe, promiscuous sex.

After the armistice, Katharine helped raise \$2 million in relief for war widows and orphans in France and England through a Committee of Mercy. Davis also toured 11 European countries (she spoke several languages and had international recognition), interviewing women doctors and social hygienists on post-war needs and helping to set up the first International Conference of Medical Women. It was held in 1919 under auspices of the National Board of Young Women's Christian Association.

Katharine had close association with the YWCA through her sister, Helen Alling Davis, who rose from phys. ed. director and then manager of the Rochester branch to New York City branch manager to national board executive.

Faith of Another Kind

From 1918 to 1928, as head of the Bureau of Social Hygiene, Dr. Davis worked to broaden its focus beyond the original prime target: prostitution and its effects on the body politic and public health. Katharine backed such studies as *Women Police* and Dr. Edith Spaulding's *Experimental Study of Psychopathic Delinquent Women*.

But Davis sought to move beyond studying criminal conduct and law enforcement responses. In effect, she argued that if society wants to better understand behavior deviant from what is thought the norm, it better first find out what constitutes the norm in fact. This notion, so deceptively simple and seemingly self-evident to us today, was extraordinarily bold and challenging at the time because the behavior she had in mind to study was "normal" human sexuality.

Davis was no radical seeking to overthrow the established stan-

dards of sexual morality. Raised a Presbyterian, she had later become a member of a Congregational Church. Through her sister, Katharine was often involved in Young Women's Christian Association activities. But faith of another kind also exerted a powerful force throughout KBD's life — her abiding belief that the sciences, including the sociological disciplines, could discover answers to human problems. Or at least point the way to answers.

As noted earlier, Davis once remarked about herself, "I have a statistical mind that always has to count noses before I draw conclusions" Well, what she counted in her study of the sexual practices of 2,200 women most definitely were not noses! Auto-erotic practices, the frequency of sexual desire, homosexual experiences, use of contraceptives, frequency of sexual intercourse, pre-marital and extra-marital sexual experiences — these and other sensitive issues were covered in the survey's questionnaire. As she had a quarter century earlier in her Philadelphia settlement district, Katharine was once again breaking windows and demolishing structures considered un-serviceable. But this time these were of the mind — society's accepted ideas and assumptions about sexual normality.

Copies of the multi-page printed form were sent to thousands of women whose names were drawn from women club memberships, college alumnae lists and similar sources. Filling out and sending back the questionnaires required that respondents have a higher degree of literacy and diligence than would have been necessary with other methods for obtaining responses. For example, stopping passersby and jotting down their responses would have widened the respondent group beyond the better educated. Similarly, drawing names from clubs and college lists excluded vast categories of people. Davis, in her *Factors in the Sex Life of 2,200 Women*, recognized and readily acknowledged the limiting aspects of the methods used. Nevertheless, she believed the results served to shed more statistical light than had existed previously on these very private matters having major social implications. In her introduction, she wrote:

. . . except on the pathological side, to a great extent sex is scientifically an unexplored country. Because of the lack of data as to normal experiences of sex, on which to base educational programs, . . . the Bureau of Social Hygiene . . . undertook to make a study of the sex life of normal women.

. . . *The work we were to undertake was to discover conditions among so-called normal women. We could not consider fine differentiations as the meaning of 'normal.' We used the term to mean the woman who was not pathological mentally or physically and who was capable of adjusting herself satisfactorily to her social group. Although recognizing the limitations of the questionnaire method, it was adopted as that best suited to the purpose in hand.*

. . . *There has been no attempt to support or disprove any theories respecting any of the phenomena studied, nor have we formulated any of our own which we think is desirable or safe to advance. We are content to present the data in as clear a form as possible for the use of others. The difficulty and often the impossibility of securing comparable data leads us to hope these studies of the sex life of so large a group of intelligent women will furnish a way-mark with which future studies may be compared.*

Gender Gap or Vision Gap?

As often happens with trailblazers, Katharine found some colleagues a bit burned up over the direction of her work. They did not like the way they thought it reflected upon the bureau. Her former Chicago University professor George Vincent had become president of the Rockefeller Foundation in 1927 but was out of sympathy with the kind of research she was doing and advocating for the bureau. Add to the mix that age had begun to take its toll on Davis, causing extended absences.

Yet, notwithstanding her advanced years and growing infirmities, her ideas “to put sex on the scientific map” with the bureau in the research forefront were fresh and vigorous for their time. Nevertheless, various key people rejected her approach as a “maternal health program,” a “family study,” and the “study of sex in vacuo.” They cited the vice-fighting focus of the bureau’s origins. They argued, with conservatively sound reasoning, that the kind of studies Davis wanted the bureau to emphasize would run far afield from that mandate.

Whether or not a gender gap played any part in their resistance, there was indeed a vision gap. Katharine saw the forest of human relations and how this new frontier in social science — sex research

— might clear paths to understanding the whole human ecology, including its tangle of criminal undergrowth. Her colleagues saw their particular tree, the Bureau, and its historical anti-vice roots, and that's where their focus remained fixed. In doing so, they regarded themselves as keeping faith with the bureau's founding principles, even if that meant disagreeing with one of its founding principals — Davis.

Davis' monumental sex study of 2,200 women began in 1920 and was nearing fruition by 1927. The project's final stages, the approach of old age, increasing ill health (gallbladder, high blood pressure and a heart condition), bureau direction differences, and the end of her 10-year contract — all converged about the same time. The decision was made not to extend her contract. But Rockefeller Jr. made financial arrangements for her "retirement" that Davis characterized as "generous" in a letter thanking him.

The bureau's post-Davis studies focused on illegal drug trafficking, delinquency, and the criminal justice system, certainly important concerns. It moved away from prostitution and any gender focus.

Despite downplay efforts by the Bureau and by Harpers Brothers, the original publishers in 1929, Davis' book sold well. It received wide attention in the popular press as well as the scholarly journals, in this country and abroad. F. W. Stella Browne, the British feminist active in a wide array of causes, wrote a glowing review in "The New Generation." Browne, whose causes included suffrage, pacifism, birth control, divorce law reform, sexual liberation, and socialism, declared: "The moral of Dr. Davis' fine and helpful study is to realize the 'infinite variety' of human nature."

What Browne and others found so important in Davis' study were its statistical indications that certain sexual practices and attitudes previously associated in the prevailing public mind with the marginal segments of society were prevalent in mainstream womanhood. The Davis sex statistics meant to many that the definition of normal when applied to sexual practices had to be reassessed and in some cases readjusted; how much so, depended upon the original viewpoints of those doing the reassessments.

Whatever its demographic shortcomings, the Davis sex survey opened a field of inquiry for others to follow. It was forerunner to the Kinsey Report and the Masters and Johnson studies that now

identify the field. In fact, more than a decade later, Dr. Alfred Charles Kinsey would receive Rockefeller-affiliated support for his studies of people's sex lives, but by then both the bureau and Davis were long gone from the scene.

1000+ at Waldorf Testimonial

Davis had hoped to remain at the bureau another few years, perhaps until her 70th birthday. Although her disappointment at being “retired” was evident, she accepted the bureau’s decision with good grace, promising — with her characteristic self-mocking humor — there would be no need to carry her “off the stage kicking + screaming!” Her choice of stage imagery in reference to her impending retirement is intriguing. It brings to mind that her acknowledged first childhood ambition was the stage.

Certainly throughout her career she was often in the spotlight — school board candidate in Philadelphia, constitutional convention delegate candidate in New York, organizer of earthquake relief, featured speaker at penology conferences and suffragist rallies, leading witness at legislative hearings, subject of continual coverage by the press corps as a city commissioner and of frequent interviews by journalists as reformatory warden and social hygiene bureau head. In a sense, the childhood ambition had never really been discarded; it had been achieved. Katharine had been “on stage” all her professional life.

Upon learning of the scheduled retirement, Davis’ friends and colleagues began to mount a grand finale production number in her honor. Dr. Valeria H. Parker, president of the National Council of Women, chaired the committee on arraignments for the testimonial. Other committee members included Mrs. H. Edward Drier of the Women’s City Club, Mrs. Leslie Tompkins of the New York State League of Women Voters, Mrs. Mortimer Menken of the Jewish Board of Guardians, Mrs. Robert E. Speer of the National Board of the YWCA, Arthur Kellogg of “The Survey,” the social work journal, and Dr. William F. Snow of the American Social Hygiene Association.

More than 1,000 people filled the Waldorf Astoria ballroom at her testimonial dinner Thursday evening, Feb. 2, 1928. The list of sponsors and guests attending read like the Who’s Who of New York and Progressive America. They included Eleanor Roosevelt, Grace

Abbott, Jane Addams, Dr. Nicholas Murry Butler, Carrie Chapman Catt, Mary E. Drier, Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, Walter Lippman, Judge William McAdoo, Dr. Henry Noble McCracken, John D. Rockefeller Jr., Lillian Wald and Felix Warburg, whose names are still recognized today.

There were scores more whose names were easily recognized in their own day. The latter category would include, for example, Dr. S. Josephine Baker, who formed the division of children's hygiene in the city health department; Dr. John Kingsbury, sponsor of child welfare programs; Dr. Robert L. Dickinson, birth control advocate; the Rev. Dr. John Haynes Holmes of Community Church, the American Civil Liberties Union leader; Mrs. Haley Fiske, wife of the Metropolitan Life Insurance president; Women's Court Judge Jean H. Norris, Greenwich House director Mary K. Simkhovitch, Barnard dean Virginia C. Gildersleeve, State Probation Commissioner Mary E. Paddon, Pennsylvania's Sleighton Reformatory of Girls Superintendent Martha P. Falconer, and Dr. Lenna L. Meanes of the Women's Foundation for Health.



Formal photo taken during BSH tenure.
(Courtesy of Vassar Libraries Special Collections.)

Also among this group of prominent New Yorkers participating in the Davis testimonial was Eugene Kinckle Jones, the first executive secretary of the National Urban League. Davis was an early Urban League seminar speaker. The League was the kind of social reform/research and advocacy group that would have strong appeal to her. It had grown out of concern about the economic situation facing blacks, long a matter of interest to Katharine since Philadelphia settlement days. Formation of the National Urban League had come about as a result of a joint meeting of the Committee for Improving Industrial Conditions of Negroes in New York and the National League for the Protection of Colored Women, two groups wanting to base their efforts on find-

ings of scientific study. Among its other worthwhile activities attractive to Davis, the League engaged in concentrated research on particular aspects of urban life experienced by African-Americans, reporting documented findings and proposing well-thought-out programs addressing those needs, establishing organizational structures and financing to implement the programs, and then moving on to the next study.

The testimonial arrangements committee set up a pre-TV *This Is Your Life* format with dais speakers taking verbal strolls down memory lanes to talk about different periods in Davis' life.

—Prof. Emma H. Gunther told about Katharine's years of teaching Dunkirk high schoolers.

—Lillian Wald spoke of Davis' days as head of the Philadelphia settlement house.

—Mrs. Haley Fiske recounted KBD's Bedford years.

—Dr. Edith R. Spaulding discussed their work at the Bedford social hygiene screening lab.

—Hastings H. Hart of the Russell Sage Foundation recited the Sicilian quake relief heroics.

—Judge William McAdoo discussed her work with the city's magistrates.

—Women's Court Chief Probation Officer Alice C. Smith told of their efforts there.

—Mrs. Mortimer Menken detailed the Parole Commission initiative.

—Dr. William F. Snow reported upon their WWI training camp hygiene activities.

—Dr. Edith Hale Swift spoke about their European tour for the women physicians congress.

—Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt recalled their woman suffrage campaigns.

—Vassar President Henry Noble MacCracken told of her long association with the college.

—John D. Rockefeller Jr. spoke about their Bureau of Social Hygiene work together.

—Bascom Johnson told of her role in League of Nations investigations of the sex slavery trade.

On the last reference, perhaps mention should be made that the

League of Nations, like the United Nations today, had a number of subdivisions and associated bodies. Some of these were called “technical committees.” One such was the Social Questions Committee headed by Dame Rachael Crowdy, believed the only female League of Nations committee chairperson. In 1927, the committee published *Report of the Special Body of Experts on Traffic in Women and Children*. By L. of N. document standards, this report became a best seller and caused quite a stir internationally. Bascom Johnson was the director of investigations for the body of experts that did the study for the Social Questions Committee. Davis, who had a network of social hygiene contacts around the world and had access to underwriting funds, helped the project.

Three Among Those Who Spoke

Three other KBD testimonial speakers are selected here for more than a passing mention. Two help illustrate that Davis’ impact on American penology continued long after she left the field. The third constitutes an interesting counterpoint to Robert Hebbard who grilled Davis on her “race mixing” at Bedford.

The two with Correction backgrounds were Burdette Gibson Lewis and Mary B. Harris.

Lewis was 22 years junior to Davis. She had sworn him in as her Deputy Commissioner. Two years later she witnessed his being sworn in as her successor. He told the testimonial audience about his four years of working with Davis. Even when she had become Parole Commission chairperson, the working association continued because, as Correction Commissioner, he was an ex officio member of her parole panel. After the Mitchel single-term administration went out of office, Lewis started as New Jersey Commissioner of Charities and Corrections in May 1918. In 1919, that department was renamed, and he became the Commissioner of Institutions and Agencies until resigning, effective Jan. 1, 1926, to enter private business. Harpers published a book by Lewis in 1917 called *The Offender and his relation to law and society*. He contributed to a study of the criminal justice system in Cleveland sponsored by the Cleveland Foundation and directed and edited by Roscoe Pound and Felix Frankfurter in 1922 entitled *Criminal Justice in Cleveland*. Lewis addressed “Correctional and Penal Treatment.”

Mary Belle Harris told the Waldorf audience about knowing

Katharine from their University of Chicago days together. In fact, Harris was teaching special classes at Jane Addams' Hull House when she first met Davis. Much later when KBD had become Correction Commissioner, Dr. Davis persuaded archaeologist/teacher Harris to join DOC as superintendent of Blackwell's Island women's workhouse. There quarters designed for 150 housed 700. She and Davis worked to turn that facility, considered the worst on Blackwell's, into a model institution. They introduced a library, an exercise yard, an inmate classification system, and eliminated unnecessary petty rules. Harris later joined Lewis in New Jersey where she headed the State Reformatory for Women at Clinton. Harris moved on to correction posts in Pennsylvania and at federal facilities, including service as head of the Bureau of Prisons women's institution in Alderson, West Virginia, to which she had been appointed superintendent only a few years earlier. Originally called the Federal Industrial Institution for Women, it was the Bureau of Prisons equivalent of a reformatory not unlike Bedford in terrain, layout and penal philosophy. On a sloping, shaded bluff overlooking the Greenbriar River and in the shadow of the Alleghenies, it was the only one of its kind in the country.

In her 1936 book about her career in penology *I Knew Them in Prison*, Harris credited Davis — as did both she and Lewis in their 1928 testimonial talks — with having a major influence on their correctional careers. They carried forward way beyond New York City limits many of the penal reforms and principles they had learned working with Katharine. Scores of other Davis colleagues during her 17 years in correction likewise continued in the field after she had left it, applying and adapting Davis approaches. Dr. Davis ranked as perhaps the most influential penologist of her time. Even after leaving the field, she was consulted officially by various Correctional agencies across the country.

Although retired, Davis never forgot the people she had worked with during her correctional years. The Rockefeller Archives Center has KBD correspondence seeking to promote the possible appointment of Lewis in the incoming-LaGuardia administration. The Vassar College Libraries' Special Collection has a letter from Davis soliciting contributions for a fund to build a chapel for the female inmates at Harris' Alderson facility. The

letterhead for “The Chapel Fund, Federal Industrial Institution for Women” carried the slogan: “A Symbol of Human Sisterhood — The Gift of the Women of America.” On it, Davis was listed as “Chairman, Committee of Endorsement.” (They had not yet advanced to “Chairperson” or “Chair.”) The letter declared “500 federal women prisoners . . . have asked for a Chapel for their spiritual devotions.” An attachment explained the committee consisted of “representatives of some 20 organizations of women, including Catholic, Protestant and Jewish bodies.”

The third testimonial speaker selected for consideration here is Alderman Frederick Randolph Moore, publisher of the “New York Age,” the leading African-American weekly of its time. He had been active in the start of the National Urban League, and was an organizer of the National Negro Business League in association with Booker T. Washington. Moore noted how Davis found time in her busy schedule to chair the board of Katy Ferguson Houses for unwed African-American mothers. He also lauded how, throughout her career, Davis dealt even-handedly with all people and had worked to help those in need, regardless of race, color, creed or nationality. One can imagine Davis as she listened to Moore speak. She might well have thought back to that grilling about her “race mixing” at Bedford that Robert Hebbard, the State Board of Charities secretary, had subjected her to 14 years earlier. She may have looked across that ballroom sea of a thousand faces — all races, colors, creeds, nationalities — and smiled to herself, inwardly remarking with her characteristic wry wit, “How’s *THAT* for mixing, Mr. Hebbard?”

Incidentally, the maternity home, which began operations in the early 1920s and continued about half way through the 1950s, had taken the name of another great New York woman ahead of her time: Catherine Ferguson better known as Katy Ferguson. She was a former slave whose freedom had been purchased for her by abolitionist women who saw great potential in the young woman. Catherine made a success of a pastry business that she set up on Thompson Street. In 1793, she started a School for the Poor even though she herself could neither read nor write. It was perhaps the first Sunday school and first integrated school in the city’s history; in it, poor children, literally off the streets, were taught simple lessons of education and edification, regardless of race or color.