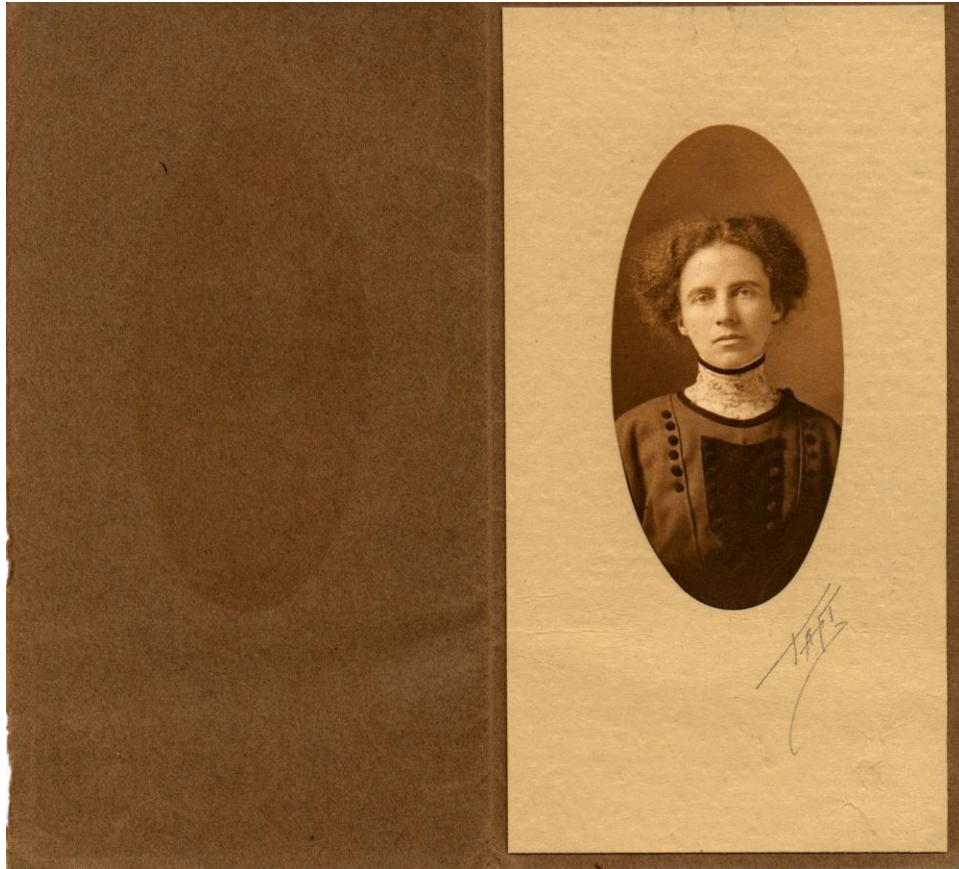


*Jessie Elvira Jenks:  
An Educated Woman in the American Workforce*



*“I went out wondering if woman took an active part in all affairs if the world wouldn’t be a great deal pleasanter.” ~ Jessie Jenks, January 6, 1894*

## **Jessie E. Jenks: Educated Women and Work in America**

### ***Amanda Rosner***

In my museum studies class at Hartwick College, we were given the opportunity to select an object from the Greater Oneonta Historical Society's collection to research and design an exhibit about. We went to the fourth floor attic of Clark Hall where the collection was stored. While the GOHS building was being renovated, the collection was exposed to terrible conditions, including high humidity and moisture promoting deterioration, shrinkage, bacterial growth. Nevertheless, I came across an old chest that contained hundreds of letters from various Oneonta families. Many letters and documents were neatly bundled by a family called Jenks. There were stacks of documents from the estate of Willard S. Jenks that dated from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; what was most interesting were the bundles of letters written to Willard S. Jenks and his wife, Rhoda, from their daughter, Jessie Elvira Jenks. In addition to three journals, there were teaching contracts, report cards, recommendations, resumes, newspaper clippings, and stacks of letters from 1892 to 1894 and 1930. Using these sources, I learned that Jessie Jenks was an ideal example of an American woman at the turn of the century who, although allowed to be educated, was excluded from certain occupations and pushed towards more feminine professions that fell into what was called a "woman's sphere."

Jessie Elvira Jenks was born on February 5, 1873 in Oneonta, New York to Willard S. and Rhoda Harris Jenks. Ms. Jenks's journals document her life from 1885-1892 between the ages of 12 and 19. Willard S. Jenks was a dairy farmer and in 1887 he was named President of the Dairymen Farmer's Association of Otsego, New York, which often held conventions at Mt. Vision. Most of his speeches and essays, published in the *Oneonta Star*, were diligently cut out and saved by Jessie. It appears that her father ran the farm with only one or two hired men, while her mother took care of the house, canned harvested food, prepared meals, and cleaned. Jessie had a brother, Alton C. Jenks, who did not live in the house during the period when Jessie was writing her journals. He was married to a young woman named Jennie, and they had their own farm close by and often visited Jessie and her family. Jessie was affectionately called "Dolly" by her father and her brother. The Jenks seemed a close knit family with aunts, uncles, and cousins constantly visiting.

Jessie's days were very alike. In a journal entry dated April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1889, she said, "My journal writing seems to have been rather irregular lately, but there has not been much to write. One day is very nearly like the others." Although her days were governed by routine, it was a regime of learning. Her well-educated mother home schooled Jessie, but she also took private piano lessons with Miss Vivian Herrington and elocution lessons with Mrs. Carpenter. Most days, following breakfast, Jessie cleared the breakfast table, did the dishes, then

studied, read or practiced the piano. She did not do chores other than cleaning the inside of the house occasionally. She was well-read and seemed to have a well-rounded education, studying science, art, geography, history, grammar, geology, arithmetic, literature, botany, zoology, chemistry, architecture, and religion. She also read for pleasure such books as *Little Women*, *Jane Eyre*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, novels by Charles Dickens, and essays by Emerson. In the journal entry dated January 14, 1889, she briefly mentioned her interest in Prohibition. She had just ordered a music book that contained the Battle Songs of Prohibition and couldn't wait to learn them.

Jessie's letters to her parents between 1892-1894 reflect her years studying at the New England Conservatory in Boston. At the Conservatory, Jessie was able to experience the bustling city of Boston at a critical point in her life, and she was exposed to new people and ideas. She lived in dorm room 549 with Miss Willie Abernethy and took private lessons and classes in harmony, piano, voice, music history, and other subjects. She was on a strict practice schedule and would sometimes practice for six or more hours a day. When she wasn't in class or practicing, she would take walks by herself around Boston, run errands, attend lectures, visit art museums, spend time with friends or write letters. When she wrote home, she would always note the freedom and independence she felt. In a letter from 1892, she wrote, "I rather thoroughly enjoyed walking independently among the throngs of people. I like going among the strangers unnoticed, I feel such a sense of freedom" (Jenks Collection, November 27, 1892 Letter, Greater Oneonta Historical Society, hereafter referred to as GOHS). In January of 1893, Jessie was on the verge of turning twenty-one. Her father, recognizing her accomplishments, allowed her to open a bank account to celebrate "like any boy." Jessie enjoyed the freedom and respect her father gave her, as she demonstrated in this letter to him in which she wrote, "It does me good to have you write to me as if I had a little mind, and was not a giggling chatterer, such as one half the girls – I won't call them ladies; for they are not." In another letter of the same year, Jessie wrote, "One thing I like to do here, though not at home, is to go by myself independently among strangers. I wonder sometimes if I am the same person who left Oneonta last September" (Jenks Collection, December 27, 1892 Letter, GOHS).

Though she walked freely, she had to deal with having to report where she was going whenever she left the dorm and obtained a white pass to leave un-chaperoned. Such limitations angered her, especially when it involved going to see *Hamlet*. In a letter dated January 15, 1893, she wrote, "This last point is a rather hard one to get around, for the available chaperones are few, and few of them would care especially about going. But I am going to hear *Hamlet*. There are a number of difficulties in the way, chaperonage being the most serious, but I have a pretty good faculty for doing what I set out to do" (Jenks Collection, January 15, 1893 Letter, GOHS).

Jessie thought that being a teacher would add to her independence. "I think giving my orders, and the sense of being where pupils may observe me will add to my independence, and self-confidence, and I have a passion for acquiring all I can of these qualities" (Jenks Collection, April 30, 1893 Letter, GOHS). Part of Jessie's goal in becoming educated was to reinforce her sense of independence. In a letter to her father, she explained to him that she wanted to stay another year in Boston after completing her first at the N.E.C. "If I stay at home next year, it seems to me that much as I should enjoy being in my home, I should be very restless – even discontented. I have tried my powers, just in coming here, a little and thus far they have responded to my demands. They grow in strength by use. I want to go on. I feel impatient perhaps, but I want to get so much out of life" (Collection, April 30, 1893 Letter, GOHS).

Religion sometimes interfered with Jessie's desire to live life to its fullest, a problem that she openly discussed in her letters to her parents. It was required that she attend chapel every day, and after reading all her letters it became clear that Jessie wasn't religious. Although she did go to church on Sundays, each week she attended a different one to hear sermons that conveyed inspirational ideas. In a letter from 1893, Jessie wrote,

Am going to observe the holiday (Washington's Birthday) by not going to Chapel. Were it not that the record of one's moral standing in the Conservatory is based partly on Chapel attendance I believe I should never go. I just wish you and papa were half-obliged to attend Church three quarters of an hour everyday, and hear about the Judgment Day, and Heaven and the other place, and hear how wicked you were, you had been "living up to the light that was in you" all day. I think you would have more sympathy for me after a few months experience.

In addition to frustrations with Chapel, Jessie was candid about her lack of faith, telling her parents, "I may not believe the Bible, but I do believe many of its sayings." On one occasion when Mr. Kneeland, the pastor for chapel, addressed his talks to the young women of the Conservatory, his and Jessie's conceptions of womanhood clashed. She wrote in another letter home, "One he told us the four essentials of a woman's character, if she would be a true woman. The first was modesty, the second domesticity, the third helpfulness, and the fourth religion. I fear I do not possess any of these" (Jenks Collection, October 9, 1892 Letter, GOHS). She was strong-minded enough to express her views openly to her parents. "You cannot understand how it rasps me to hear every night things I do not believe one word of. Sometimes I actually dread going to Chapel...constant hearing, for me, has been the worst possible thing from a religious point of view, for I have come to hate the whole thing and feel like a

hypocrite as I assent to the assentions” (Jenks Collection, January 15, 1893 Letter, GOHS). She went to hear the sermons because she liked to contemplate the issues raised by the preacher, not out of a love of religion. In a letter from June 4, 1893, Jessie describes hearing a sermon given by a woman.

Mrs. L. Criniston Chant preached. I went prepared to like her very much – after she began I did not like her, and was beginning to think there was some foundation for the statement that “woman’s place” is not the pulpit when she suddenly carried me away, and at the end of the sermon I thought I had never heard anything like it. I went out wondering if woman took an active part in all affairs if the world wouldn’t be a great deal pleasanter.

This was a radical notion for a young woman in the Victorian Age; Jessie was ahead of her time.

After two years of studying at the New England Conservatory, she returned to Oneonta. Due to the lack of money and the economic strain her education was causing her parents, she decided not to return to the Conservatory. It cost well over a hundred dollars a semester, plus living expenses. For a middle-class dairy farmer this was not an easy amount to raise. Nevertheless, Jessie was certified to teach up to fourth grade and assumed that when she came home she would have to begin working. As independent as she was at the Conservatory, Jessie had many fears about her future and the success she hoped to achieve as a working woman. In an 1893 letter she wrote, “I often feel blue over my future, certainly there will have to be a great deal of hard work in it. But when I see the many women here who are here from their own endeavour, and who have and are succeeding, I know that what they can do, I can” (Jenks Collection, December 27, 1894 Letter, GOHS). Jessie might have been scared at the uncertainty of her future, but she also was determined.

My life is to be one of hard steady work I see more clearly every day how hard it will be, if I succeed as I want. But it is only at rare intervals that I feel as if I did not want hard work. I do not want more work than I can do, but I feel that it is a duty to myself and to the world that I bring out and use all the capacity I have. I have made music my choice and shall do the best I can in it. But I see more clearly every day that if I do what I want to in it I must put my whole strength, myself in it. No man can serve two masters. (Jenks Collection, January 24, 1893 Letter, GOHS).

In another letter from 1893, she wrote, "What about music pupils? I want to begin work as soon as possible" (Jenks Collection, May 7, 1893 Letter, GOHS). However, two weeks before she was leaving the Conservatory for good, on January 14, 1894, she expressed her fears and doubts:

It is with a good deal of trepidations that I contemplate venturing into the world of work, within the next month. Surely I can do what others have done – I see no reason why I may not succeed in time, yet I feel as if I were preparing to plunge in an ice-water bath. It is a new continent in my life-world. I have sighted land sooner than I expected but I know not whether its climate will be glacial, tropical or temperate; whether it is fertile or a desert; whether lions and tigers, or more peaceful animals abound; whether the inhabitants are friendly or warlike. I hope for the best, yet sometimes fear the worst. And I am anxious whichever may come, for this uncertainty to end (Jenks Collection, January 14, 1893 Letter, GOHS).

After leaving the Conservatory, she taught a private class for two years, then entered the Oneonta State Normal School in 1896 with an option for a classical or an English education.

While at the Oneonta State Normal School, she received an English diploma and took liberal arts courses. The most surprising information on her report cards was the number of required science classes, such as, botany, familiar science, physiology, zoology, physics, chemistry, mineralogy, and geology. It was unusual for a woman to have such a well-rounded education in science at a time when women were discouraged from going into science field since it was considered a profession for men only. She also took a number of math classes, including arithmetic, algebra, trigonometry, and astronomy. She was required to take American history and general history along with specialized classes like grammar, English literature, rhetoric, geography, reading, vocal music, drawing, and penmanship. There were also special classes for students who hoped to become future teachers; these included psychology, history of education, philosophy of education, methods in drawing, music, penmanship, elementary science, grade English, school economy, school law, civics, and methods in grammar, reading, and geography (Jenks Collection, Report Cards, 1896-99). Jessie graduated from the Oneonta State Normal School in June 1899. It was then that she began her life teaching throughout New York State. She taught in places like Otego, Clayton, Warsaw, Glenn Falls, and Schenectady, New York. In a letter to Dr. J. E. Slaughter, the Secretary on the Board of Education for Warsaw, New York on May 15, 1906, Jessie explains,

I studied music for two years at the New England Conservatory in Boston; taught private class for two years; and then entered the Normal School at Oneonta, New York. I was graduated from that institution in June, 1899. Since then I have spent a year studying drawing under Mrs. Ella Cobbath, of the Oneonta Normal faculty; and a summer at Chautauqua in Public School Music work under Miss Julia Crane of the Potsdam Normal. Since graduation, I have taught one year in a country school; two years in the Union School at Otego, New York; and for two years and a half I have had charge of music and drawing at Clayton, New York; five years of the same work at Warsaw, New York ; and three years and a half at Fort Edward (Jenks Collection, May 15, 1906 Letter, GOHS).

Unfortunately, her teaching contracts do not shed light on when Jessie retired from teaching – or if she ever fully stopped. She may have given private piano lessons in her own house when she was much older.

Jessie's letters from the summer of 1930 describe a vacation to England and Scotland with her childhood friend, Mae Hathaway. On July 8, 1930, Jessie and Mae drove "Little Henry," their Ford, through New Jersey and then to New York City where they went to the art museum and Central Park before boarding the Cunard R.M.S. "Tuscania" steamer that would take them to England. On July 20, they were in London and throughout July traveled to Lincoln, York, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Inverness (Scotland), Southampton, Plymouth, Salisbury, Exeter, Oxford, Wales, Oban (Scotland), Hereford, Stratford upon Avon, Lichfield, Shrewsbury, Chester, and Liverpool. They explored castles, churches and cathedrals, historic houses, battlefields, the British Museum, medieval barns and other historic places throughout England. She loved the food and countryside of each place they explored and described in great detail everything she learned and saw. On September 7, 1930 she was on her way back to Oneonta on the Cunard R.M.S. "Samaria." She also kept a small travel journal that listed what they did each day and exactly where they went. It appears they saw just about every famous tourist sight in England on a strenuous trip with little rest. Her accounts of England, demonstrated her fierce independence and love of learning about history of buildings, events and people. Nevertheless, Jessie seemed to be relieved to come back home to Oneonta.

Perhaps because she was so widely traveled and well-educated, Ms. Jenks was a woman who left an impression on people she encountered throughout her life, one of whom was Carol Young Woodard who established a scholarship to honor Ms. Jenks. On August 11, 1964, in a letter to the President of Hartwick College, Dr. Frederick M. Binder, Woodard explained her husband's and her intentions for the scholarship: "We feel it would be an excellent idea to

grant the assistance to a junior or senior woman majoring in the Humanities or the Social Sciences. If possible, we would like the description to read – „The Jessie E. Jenks Scholar“ and that the award is made by Mr. and Mrs. Ralph A. Woodard (Carol Young “50.) Miss Jenks was for many years the housemother at Gamma Phi Delta and beloved by the Gamma Girls.” Jessie Jenks began as a housemother at Hartwick College in 1935 when she was 62 years old, and she was last mentioned as a housemother in 1947. She would have been 74 years old then. The most that was said of her was in the Hartwick yearbook for 1942-3. “Gamma Phi Delta Sorority opened its season with the acceptance Miss Jessie E. Jenks as an honorary member of the sorority. She has been the housemother of the Gamma girls for the last eight years.”

Unfortunately, there are no records about Gamma Phi Delta and its housemothers. I wrote a letter to Dr. Carol Woodard explaining my research and asking her to meet with me. Interviewing her, I found out what Jessie was really like. Mrs. Woodard informed me that Jessie lived in the Gamma house with the girls on 104 Chestnut Street and did all the cooking, cleaning, and laundry, and was responsible for watching over the fourteen girls. She interviewed and approved of any male visitors in the foyer before the Gamma girl could leave the house on a date. Male visitors never went past the parlor in the house. Women were allowed to stay out until 10 p.m. one night a week and could stay out until 11 p.m. one night per month. Mrs. Woodard described Jessie as “a perfect Victorian lady” – proper, conservative, elegant, knowledgeable and confident. She was a lady “from head to toes” and had to be an example for how the women should behave. Carol said Jessie ran a “tight ship.” Gamma women had complete and utter respect for her. Carol also mentioned that in the 1940’s, Jessie was “from another world – the Victorian world.” Although Carol said she did not spend as much time with Jessie as other Gamma girls did, she always liked Jessie very much so she designated a scholarship in her name. Apparently, there was a rumor among the Gamma girls that Jessie had a fiancée at one time, but he died tragically which was why she was single and never had children. Of course, there is no proof of this, but maybe it was the girls’ way of explaining why Jessie did not fulfill a woman’s duty and live her life a certain way.

Carol Woodard has been a great help to me, and even provided other Gamma sisters to contact that she knew talked to Jessie more often. By interviewing someone who actually knew her and lived with her for a time, I pieced together Jessie’s life in old age which I had no written record of previously. Jessie Jenks’ life work demonstrates the opportunities she had and the decision she made to dedicate her life to teaching music and drawing. A woman choosing a career in life and being so well-educated was unusual for the later 19<sup>th</sup> century since women were often denied the right to attend universities. Jessie had remarkable freedom and schooling for a time that enforced strict rules regarding gender roles and the traditional work of women. Ironically, however,



as a housemother for the Gamma Phi Delta sorority, she seemed to disregard her earlier desire for education, work, and experience, instead keeping the women of the sorority in their traditional place. She appears to have become more of a traditional woman in her old age, advising the sorority women how to be proper ladies and to stay within the bounds of “true womanhood” that Jessie herself rebelled against as a young woman at the Conservatory.

In the Victorian Age, “The founding fathers spoke literally when they declared that all men are created equal. Women lacked basic civil rights, such as the vote, control over their property and wages, custodianship of their children, and access to the professions and education” (Lumsden, 1997: 18). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women’s freedoms were very limited because of a powerful patriarchal society that kept women in their proper place. An idea that was very popular in this century was men and women belonged to separate spheres. The family was the basis of order. Men worked in the public sphere and were subject to compromising their morals with business deals, while women were to remain at home and supervise the children and servants. Many men considered women “virtuous” when they remained in their domestic sphere, “angels” whose obligation was to provide comfort, happiness, and moral values to their families, as well as children (Merriman, 1996: 646). A middle or upper-class woman of this time period was tied closely to her father and husband who had control over her. A woman’s “place” was in the home caring for children, planning and overseeing the preparation of meals, supervising the servants, and attending to family social responsibilities. Women were seen as the selfless moral authority within the family and had great influence over the education of children while being responsible for providing guidance about religion. Women were taught the basics of reading and so they could instill morals and educate their sons, but Victorian doctors blamed reading for threatening the reproductive functions of young women and possibly driving them insane (Lumsden, 1997: 21). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were excluded from most universities, could not vote, and had no control over family financial resources. Although some American colleges, such as Oberlin College, were open to women in 1833, women were forbidden from speaking in class (Lumsden, 1997:21). It was much more acceptable for women to be educated at schools like the New England Conservatory, which taught the womanly arts of music and drawing. Jessie received her first years of formal education there.

Even educated women, however, still found their opportunities for employment extremely limited. Many women were unable to enter the professions because men feared the “new woman” who demanded the same access to education and opportunity as men. The only professions that were considered acceptable were the ones that were viewed as an extension of traditionally female roles. According to historian, S. J. Kleinberg, “female professionals succeeded best in those occupations which seemed most closely

allied to the home and traditional female roles, such as teaching and nursing, but they had trouble finding acceptance in medicine and law, which were perceived as authoritative and public" (Kleinberg, 1999: 175). Even as teachers, women were not allowed to advance to become principals, superintendents, or members of the Board of Education. Men felt that such work would detract from Victorian feminine ideals of virtue and purity. If a woman did work outside the home, it was seen as a temporary position and she would naturally quit as soon as she was married. Although marriage generally brought a woman's career to an end, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, professional women frequently remained unmarried. This is the path Jessie chose; she never married or had children and dedicated her life to music and teaching.

This past year has been the most exciting research I have done and find it so interesting to be investigating her life to find out what happened to her. My research here is not finished though. There are still many mysteries that need to be solved about Jessie's long and fulfilling life. She grew up in Oneonta, studied music and drawing at the New England Conservatory in Boston, dedicated her life to teaching, traveled to England and Scotland, served as the housemother for a Hartwick sorority. She was fiercely independent, which led her to accomplish many things during her lifetime. Jessie Jenks showed the world what a woman could do during a time of many doubts about their abilities. She was a woman of her time, yet she triumphed and accomplished what she wanted to do. Jessie Jenks was just one example of a woman within a world of women at the turn of the century.

#### **Works Cited**

- Bernard, Jessie. *Academic Women*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1964.
- Burstyn, Joan N. *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood*. New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980.
- Cogan, Frances B. *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1989. .
- Edwards, June. *Women in American Education, 1820-1955: The Female Force and Educational Reform*. London: Greenwood Press, 2002.
- Gordon, Linda, and Rosalyn Baxandall, ed. *American's Working Women: A Documentary History 1600 to the Present*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995.
- Grument, Madeleine R. *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.
- Hesse-Biber, Sharlene, and Gregg Lee Carter. *Working Women in America: Split Dreams*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Hoffman, Nancy. *Woman's "True" Profession: Voices from the History of Teaching*. Boston: University of Massachusetts, 1981.
- Kessler-Harris, Alice. *Out to Work: A history of wage-earning women in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Kleinberg, S. J. *Women in the United States 1830 – 1945*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999.
- Lumsden, Linda J. *Rampant Women: Suffragist and the Right of Assembly*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997.

*Jessie E. Jenks: Educated Women and Work in America*

---

- Silverberg, Helene. *Gender and American Social Science: The Formative Years*. Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 1998.
- Wheeler, Marjorie Spruill, ed. *One Woman, One Vote: Rediscovering the Woman Suffrage Movement*. Troutdale: New Sage Press, 1995.

