

Chronicles of Brunonia

“The Women’s Sphere”: Who Was Sarah Doyle?

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Perhaps the most important female figure in the history of Providence and Brown University, educator Sarah Doyle led a life dedicated to leadership and activism on the part of women and education that extended from the Brown campus to the nation while the 20th century was still new.

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In 1891, the first women were admitted to Brown University. A building for Brown's women soon followed. Sarah Doyle was instrumental in each of these momentous events in the history of Brown University. At the dedication of Pembroke Hall on November 22nd, 1897, Sarah Doyle spoke what are undoubtedly her most famous words: "The women's sphere is one of infinite and indeterminate radius."

Sarah Doyle was as much a clubwoman as an educator, which enabled her to move and shake as much as she did. At the turn of the century, causes such as women's education and suffrage, movements against child labor and towards a cure for tuberculosis found an organizational and financial platform through the upper-class social network of clubs. The Rhode Island Women's Club was created in 1876 due in large part to Sarah Doyle's efforts, as was the Rhode Island Society for the College Education of Women (RISCEW) and The Rhode Island School of Design (down the hill from the Brown campus, one of the nation's premiere art schools).

The proliferation of clubs and social activity at the turn of the century mirrored the development of the cities in which those clubs found their home bases. In the late 1800s, Providence was growing. City planners were wondering what to do with sewage and sketching system designs that followed European models. Streetcars trundled across Chalkstone Avenue and reached North Providence. Roger Williams Park had grown to 430 acres. Providence was expanding along with the industrial boom, attracting immigrant workers and thereby becoming one of the nation's first hubs of ethnic diversity. What began as the Providence Steam Engine Company had, after various name changes, merged

with the Rice and Sargent Company to form the Providence Engineering Works. The expansion of the electrical grid was making possible the maintenance of the nearby rubber plant and Providence Steel and Iron Co.

In 1899 M. Carey Thomas, President of Bryn Mawr, published a pamphlet called "Education of Women", which he referred to as an "experiment, if it can be called that." Roughly half of the nation's female college graduates were becoming teachers. That year, 102 out of a recorded 14,824 women graduates were graduates of the Women's College of Brown. Sarah Doyle could have raised all the money to build Pembroke, but she still wouldn't have been able to affect the matriculation of women to Brown were it not for an open-minded President: Andrews. President Andrews' positive attitude towards the inclusion of women at his university constituted the "magic password" Sarah Doyle and her cohorts needed to bring about the change.

Sarah Doyle certainly looked the part of severe schoolmarm at the turn of the century; dressed in the modest, long-skirted, no-nonsense garb expected of a person of her gender and profession, she was known for the alertness that never left her sharp features, for intelligent expressions that crossed the face from which graying hair smoothed sharply back into a bun. And yet she was not grim or caustic; rather, she was a beloved and idolized teacher, speaker, mobilizer, spokeswoman, organizer: she was a *leader*.

And as such, Sarah Doyle was part of a larger movement. "Anthony's Bill," the women's suffrage bill introduced to congress by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in 1878, was in the middle of a forty-year sleep: not the sound sleep of a done day but the restive sleep of the ignored — and amid the serene red

brick and spring blossoms of College Hill, the soft murmurings mirrored a political change already a half-century in the living: in 1869, Wyoming Territory gave women the right to vote; in 1870, Utah Territory; in 1893, Colorado; In 1896, Idaho. In 1849 New York saw its first woman doctor, Eliabeth Blackwell, graduate at the top of her class at Geneva College. In 1870 Ada H. Kepley, the first woman lawyer, graduated from the Union College of Law in Chicago. In 1873 Ellen Swallow Richards graduated from M.I.T to become the first woman chemist. In 1879 Belva Ann Lockwood became the first woman admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court.

By all accounts a woman of her time, Sarah Elizabeth Doyle was born in 1830 into that generation of illustrious female firsts. She would remain in Providence, where she spent all of her 92 years. Her one trip to Italy cemented her conviction that the development of civilized society could be measured by how far it had come in accepting women as equals. One of seven siblings, she graduated from Providence High School in 1846, taught in private schools for ten years, then in public ones, and served as principal of the girl's department of Providence High for 14 years before resigning in 1892. She spent a total of thirty-seven years as an educator in Providence. In 1884 she became the first woman to preside over a meeting of the National Education Association. She would have had ample excuse to retire from public life and civil service after ending her career as principal. But this was Sarah Doyle, and retirement at the young age of sixty-two was out of the question; instead, she merely became chairman of the General Federation of Women's Clubs in 1895. Present at every major meeting of educators in the country by then, Sarah Doyle became known not just in Rhode

Island but across the nation for her frankness, wit, and effectiveness as a leader and organizer.

Just as there seem to be no bounds to Doyle's legacy as an educator and commitment to activism — she did not just fight for gender equality on the Brown campus, she fought for temperance and an end to child labor as well — so there seemed to have been no bounds to her private musings and intellectual engagements. “Age and truth have met as it were in the interpretations, each feeling the profound truths in the poet's thought,” Sarah Doyle wrote to her friend Miss Slade on May 15th, 1910, to thank her for sending a book of her brother's poetry: “I have been struck by the power your brother has shown in his ability to appreciate the point of view, may I say, of one to whom life belongs to the past while his is yet to be.” Her writing is not the spidery calligraphy that so carefully kept the records of the Rhode Island Women's Club and other organizations over which she presided. Instead her penmanship is like Sarah Doyle herself: bold, practical, thoughtful, and free of ornamentation.

That elegant treasurer's log, it should be noted, traced the accrument of the \$38,000 that funded the creation of the Pembroke building Sarah Doyle and her female cohorts raised between January of 1895 and February of 1896. That the donations of women funded the construction of Brown first building for women is not just appropriate, but given the times, extremely impressive. It is a mark of Sarah Doyle's extraordinary ability to mobilize and inspire that Pembroke college was built at all, to say nothing of the very short time it took to exact the mountain of donations its construction required.

The many newspaper notices announcing her death called Sarah Doyle one of the 5 or 6 most important women in the nation. The same notices asked that attendants to her memorial service omit flowers. Even in death, it seems, Sarah Doyle eschewed the showy and unnecessary. The \$3,000 she had saved upon her death went to benefit the Pembroke library.

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Personal note from Sarah Doyle to a Miss Slade

Plethora of newspaper clippings (most not including which newspaper) announcing her death

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