

*Expanding our Understanding of the Nichols Women:
An Overview of the Project “Rose Standish Nichols:
“Her Friends and Colleagues Revealed Through Correspondence”*

Thanks to a grant awarded to the Nichols House Museum from the Scholar-in-Residence program co-sponsored by the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities and the Bay State Historical League, I was asked by the museum in January of 2003 to put my skills as a women's historian and an historian of the Progressive Era to use by investigating the voluminous correspondence written to and by Rose Standish Nichols between 1890 and 1930. These materials are housed at both the Nichols House Museum and Harvard University. The goal was to confirm, deny and hopefully expand the existing knowledge about Rose's social and social activist activities. I conducted a six month long investigation of this correspondence, reading over 600 letters, transcribing and interpreting about 400 and adding to the original research plan by exploring the lives of Rose's mother and sisters as well. The Nichols House Museum now has in its holdings a body of research detailing and contextualizing the social activities and social concerns of Rose, Marian, Margaret and Elizabeth Nichols, thereby making possible a host of future interpretive and research projects. Below is a brief summary of the findings, offered here as a way of providing friends and benefactors of the Nichols House Museum with a sense of the richness and potential of this project.

In her correspondence, Rose emerges as both an inheritor of Victorian gentility (especially of the upper-class sort) and as an energetic, independent thinking and acting woman who took advantage of the new opportunities available to women in the public sphere in the years surrounding the turn of the 20th century. From her patterns of socializing and her passion for her profession to her interest in social activism at home and abroad, Rose's correspondence describes a woman whose life suggests a well-to-do and well-mannered "New Woman", a label used by historians to describe those (usually) middle or upper class, city dwelling women who came of age in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and who had a new and vibrant sense of self, gender and mission. A New Woman took control of both her personal and professional life and boldly claimed the public sphere as her own. In so doing the New Woman transformed American life even as she transformed her own from the 1890s through the 1910s and on into 1920s.

Rose had a rich and active social life, both in Boston and when travelling the world. Parties, teas, luncheons and dinners marked her calendar; she was both a hostess and a guest at events that brought together some of Boston's (and the world's) most well-known figures.

But understanding who Rose knew and who she socialized with is only part of the task of understanding Rose, for like many women of her time and social standing, socializing, activism and professional activities merged. Women used contacts forged in one context to further goals in another. Again and again in Rose's letters details of a recent visit are followed by discussions of an upcoming meeting to address a social concern. Many gatherings served dual purposes: luncheons might bring together individuals who shared a passion for a particular cause and a fundraiser for a given activist group was likely to bring together a group of friends.

Rose's most long-lasting commitments were to international causes and concerns. True, she periodically took up a cause that had a local or national flair, but she considered herself a global citizen and her efforts were shaped by this vision. Her correspondence indicates that she was a supporter of foreign independence movements. Rose assisted the Queen of Greece in establishing social service programs in that country and she, along with her mother Elizabeth, helped raise funds for and lent support to a girls' college in Constantinople. No cause was as near to Rose's heart or took up as much of her time and energy as world peace.

Rose's involvement in the U.S. Women's Peace Party virtually from the moment of its conception led quickly to her involvement with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), a group created in spirit just before the Women's Peace Party and which was given its name in 1919 by many of the same women (from around the world) who had met in 1915 to discuss how to respond to the Great War. All indications are that Rose remained deeply and unwaveringly involved with the WILPF over the next decade. She attended critical meetings of the WILPF and was even given the right to select delegates to WILPF conferences. Rounding out Rose's peace activism was her work with the League of Free Nations, a local and national organization whose executive secretary--George Nasmyth--lived just down the street from the Nichols' home.

My research has uncovered a story about the way one woman took advantage of the changes and opportunities of the pivotal years between 1890 and 1930 to move beyond the older Victorian idea of women ornamenting parlors. Instead, like so many other women she knew, and like so many other women of her moment in history, Rose spent her most vital years doing "definite work." As a result, although I resist proclaiming that Rose is purely or merely "representative", in the final judgement, it is the relative typicality of Rose Nichols' life that makes her story worth telling.

In the process of unearthing information on Rose, it was impossible to overlook the other Nichols women--her sisters Marian and Margaret and her mother Elizabeth--for I found much of the rich detail of Rose's life in the sometimes daily correspondence that flew between and among these four women for decades. The more I read, the more I realized that there were three additional stories to be told, stories of energetic, dedicated and talented women who offer us variations on the themes of Rose's life, particularly those aspects tied to social activism.

Elizabeth's letters to her daughters and her "Diary of Widowhood" tell of a multifaceted woman who, in the pattern of 19th century women's benevolence work, was passionate about the need to help those less fortunate, but also as a woman who was interested in current events and the social concerns of the 20th century. Early letters tell not only of the various social events she attended or hosted but also of her interest in topics such as European poverty, the impact of the depression of 1893 on Bostonians, and her role in the creation of an Orphan's Asylum in Lexington in the 1890s. Over time Elizabeth acknowledged the fight for women's suffrage and proclaimed her distaste for the U.S.'s entry into WWI (even in the face of criticism by her peers). In her later years Elizabeth followed Rose's lead and became involved with the Persia Society and its work on behalf of Constantinople College.

If Rose's interests were the impetus for some of her mother's activities, the same was not necessarily true for her sisters. In fact, as Rose committed herself to ever more far-reaching and international concerns, Marian, merely one year her junior, took an almost opposite path and in time became well-ensconced in local, state and national reform and politics by way of her work on behalf of Civil Service Reform (CSR), work which included a stint as assistant secretary to the Women's Auxiliary to the Massachusetts Civil Service Reform Association, and ultimately took her to other cities and states as a speaker on the topic. In addition to her CSR work, letters and entries in Elizabeth's diaries make clear that Marian--more so than Rose--was interested in the concerns of local women and members of the working class in and around Boston. From letters of appreciation from students in classes that Marian taught in French and History (here, the evidence indicates that the students were probably from the working class), to references to Marian's attendance at hearings on behalf of mandating maximum hour laws for women workers, the evidence indicates that Marian's social activism was heavily focused on the concerns of Americans in general and Bostonians in particular.

Of all the Nichols women's stories, youngest sister Margaret's is the least well-documented by the records I examined. However, the scant evidence in the collections into which I delved, shows Margaret to have had a busy life dedicated at different times to a variety of social concerns despite the fact that she had a husband and children (the only one of the Nichols sisters to have either). She was a friend of prisoners, a member of and speaker on behalf of the League of Free Nations and a candidate for an officer's position in the Women's City Club. In addition, her papers include speeches offering a critical view of U.S. policy in Mexico in the 1920s and condemning the American tendency toward militarism, as well as a witty and intelligent essay written for a magazine competition detailing the rationale behind passage of a suffrage amendment. Finally, Margaret was known for having publicly supported the rights of arrested communist sympathizers in 1920.

A much more detailed report of my research is on file at the Nichols House, complete with a discussion of social and historical contexts for interpreting the Nichols women, lists of correspondents, visitors and people mentioned in letters and diaries, selected biographical information about noted individuals, detailed timelines of the social activities and causes taken up by the Nichols women, and an annotated bibliography on a variety of topics related to this project. My hope is that with this set of data and the accompanying initial interpretation, many more chapters will be written--not only about Rose but also about her mother and sisters as well. After all, this was a dynamic quartet whose interests sometimes overlapped and often took on unique hues but whose lives together flesh out the story of Boston women in the years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century.

- Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello, Ph.D.