

Mary Coffin Ware Dennett (1872–1947)

Mary Coffin Ware Dennett advocated for social reform in the United States in the early twentieth century, particularly regarding sex education and women's rights to access contraception. Dennett authored several publications on sex education and birth control laws. She also worked to repeal the Comstock Act, a federal law that made it illegal to distribute obscene materials through the US Postal Services. During the early 1900s, Dennett distributed a pamphlet she wrote on sex education called, "The Sex Side of Life," through the post, which triggered a series of legal challenges that contributed to the dismantling of the Comstock Act. Dennett was an advocate for sex education and contraceptives, and her actions helped increase women's access to information about reproductive health.

Dennett was born on 4 April 1872 as Mary Coffin Ware to Livonia Coffin and George Whitefield Ware in Worcester, Massachusetts. She was the second of four children, one of whom died in infancy. Dennett's father worked as a hide and wool merchant and often traveled and worked long hours to support his family. Dennett learned to read and write by the age of five and excelled in school. She spent most of her childhood in Massachusetts. In 1882, Dennett's father died of cancer and her family moved to Boston, Massachusetts, to be closer to her mother's relatives. Unable to find a profitable job because she was a woman, Dennett's mother started chaperoning, for pay, young ladies traveling to Europe.

While Dennett's mother traveled, Dennett and her two siblings stayed with their aunt and attended a public school in Boston. Lucia Ames Mead, Dennett's aunt, participated in many social reform groups, wrote numerous articles, and spoke at meetings advocating world peace and women's suffrage. The women's suffrage movement advocated for women's rights to vote. Through demonstrations, lobbying, and publications, women voiced their dissatisfaction with the laws that prohibited women from voting or participating in politics. Dennett's biographer states that Mead's social work influenced Dennett's later interest in the anti-war and suffrage movements.

In 1887, Dennett enrolled in Miss Capen's School for Girls in Northampton, Massachusetts, for high school. She graduated from Miss Capen's in 1891 and, from 1891 to 1893, attended the School of Art and Design at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. As an art and design student, Dennett studied textile design and won prizes for her art, which included tapestries and leatherwork.

After graduating from the School of Art and Design in 1894, Dennett moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to lead the department of decoration and design at the Drexel Institute of Art. In 1897, Dennett left the Drexel Institute of Art to travel to Spain and Italy, where she studied antique leatherwork. When she returned to the US after three months of travel, Dennett settled in Boston. There, she organized art exhibitions for the Society of Arts and Crafts in Boston, which focused on publicizing handcrafted artwork.

Dennett married William Hartley Dennett, whom she had met in 1894, on 20 January 1900, and continued to work. She wrote and gave lectures about arts and crafts, became a board member of the Society for Arts and Crafts, and participated in Boston social reform groups. Dennett gave birth to her first child, a son she named Carlton, on 23 December 1900. In 1903, Dennett gave birth to another boy, Appleton. However, due to a difficult labor, Dennett became ill. In addition, the infant was frail and died after three weeks. In 1905, Dennett gave birth to a third boy, Devon. After this third birth, Dennett became ill once again and gave up her professional work in order to recover.

Following the delivery, Dennett's doctor warned her not have any more children due to a laceration in her uterus that required corrective surgery, which she underwent in 1907. Following her

reproductive difficulties, Dennett and her husband refrained from intercourse. Without access to contraception, that was the way they chose to adhere to the doctor's recommendation that Dennett not become pregnant again. Dennett's husband began an affair with a family friend, and started divorce proceedings in 1909, in which he fought for custody of their two children.

In 1908, Dennett accepted a salaried position as the field secretary of the Massachusetts Suffrage Association in Springfield, Massachusetts. Dennett organized events, spoke with individuals and groups about suffrage, and recruited new members for the association. Her work publicized the organization's demands for women to receive the right to vote. Due to her success and reputation in the Massachusetts Suffrage Association, the National American Woman Suffrage Association in New York City, New York, elected Dennett as correspondence secretary in 1910. Dennett moved to New York City after accepting the position. As correspondence secretary, Dennett managed all letters sent to and from the organization, created media content to publicize the organization's mission, and managed the office. Dennett remained in that position until 1913, when she resigned after accepting an offer to lead the Twilight Sleep Association.

Dennett served as president of the Twilight Sleep Association in New York City in 1913. The term twilight sleep referred to how doctors anesthetized pregnant women so they experienced a semi-conscious state during their deliveries in order to prevent them from feeling the pain of childbirth. While women lost physical control over childbirth, they gained the ability to control the childbirth experience by deciding whether to be in pain or not. Many women started choosing doctors who could administer the anesthesia drugs.

Also in 1913, the courts granted Dennett custody of her children and finalized the divorce from her husband. The judge required Dennett's husband to pay child support, but he refused and argued that he did not make enough money to do so. Due to her ex-husband's refusal to provide child support, Dennett incurred many debts and struggled to support her two sons as a single parent.

In 1914, Dennett volunteered in the Women's Peace Party, a group in New York City that opposed the outbreak of World War I in Europe. Dennett's participation in various social reform groups enabled her to voice her beliefs and argue for political change, even though she could not exercise the right to vote as a woman.

In 1915, Dennett wrote a pamphlet titled, "The Sex Side of Life: An Explanation for Young People." She created the pamphlet in response to her eldest son's questions related to sex, and she included realistic descriptions of intercourse not often found in other books that discussed sex. In the pamphlet, she discussed that the books she had read portrayed sex as a fearful or shameful act, and she claimed that her pamphlet offered a straightforward description of the sexual and reproductive nature of humans. Much of the vagueness and misleading information that Dennett disliked resulted from the federal and state obscenity laws, like the Comstock Act, that limited the amount of detail that could be published about sex education. Dennett's clear account of sex made her pamphlet popular among her friends who searched for ways to teach their own children about sex.

Dennett became more involved in the birth control movement as she interacted with other women who argued that women should be allowed to control their fertility. Some of those women, including Jessie Ashley and Clara Gruening Stillman, advocated for abolishing the state laws prohibiting the distribution of contraceptives. Dennett worked with both Ashley and Stillman to establish the National Birth Control League in 1915, which worked to increase knowledge and access to birth control. As a member of the legislative committee of the National Birth Control League, in New York City, Dennett focused on repealing the Comstock Act by lobbying New York's federal congressmen.

During her efforts to change the Comstock Act, Dennett encountered resistance from another birth control activist, Margaret Sanger. Sanger had left the country from 1914 to 1915 to avoid prosecution for writing *The Woman Rebel*, a radical newspaper that courts charged with being obscene and promoting riots. During Sanger's absence, Dennett brought the birth control movement to the attention of the media by lobbying for state legislators to remove birth control from obscenity laws. According to historians, Dennett's success in the birth control movement led to friction between her and Sanger because the two women differed in their ideas about how to approach birth control reform. According to Sanger, Dennett told her that she disagreed with how Sanger brought attention to birth control by violating the same laws that Dennett was trying to repeal.

Another source of conflict resulted from Sanger's lobbying for doctors to receive the right to distribute birth control. Dennett disagreed with Sanger's efforts because she thought that everyone should have access, not just doctors. In 1916, Dennett's focus shifted back to women's suffrage and anti-war social reform in response to World War I and her failed attempts to lobby for a state bill against obscenity laws. She supported the re-election of Woodrow Wilson for US President, became the executive secretary of the Women's Committee to Re-elect Wilson, and later became the executive secretary of the League for Progressive Democracy, both organizations in New York City. The women in these groups claimed that Wilson shared their anti-war views and supported women's rights to vote. On 30 May 1917, Dennett helped organize the People's Council of America in New York City, an anti-war organization that supported the claim that power should rest in the hands of people and not the government.

As the war progressed and her anti-war campaigns met resistance due to Wilson's support of the war, Dennett returned to birth control activism. In 1918, she became executive secretary for the National Birth Control League in New York City. As before, she focused on repealing the Comstock Act by advocating for legislation to change the obscenity laws. In February of 1918, the Medical Review of Reviews editor agreed to publish Dennett's sex education pamphlet, "The Sex Side of Life." That year, Dennett began writing articles for the Birth Control Review, a publication that enabled members of the birth control movement to communicate about activities and activism.

In 1919, Dennett resigned from the National Birth Control League due to the lack of support from New York politicians in passing a bill to repeal state laws against birth control. Later that year, Dennett established the Voluntary Parenthood League in New York City. The Voluntary Parenthood League sought to remove birth control from obscenity laws and to better educate parents about teaching their children sex education. However, the Voluntary Parenthood League differed from the National Birth Control League because it lobbied the federal government for changes in laws, rather than lobbying each state government individually.

From 1919 to 1925, Dennett campaigned and lobbied congressmen and other federal officials to pass a bill to exempt information about birth control from obscenity laws. As the Comstock Act made it illegal to send contraceptives and information about them through the US Postal Services, Dennett appealed to the solicitor of the US Postal Services. She argued that because all mail could not be opened and checked, post offices could not enforce the Comstock Act. In response, the Post Office Department banned the circulation of any mail that contained Dennett's "The Sex Side of Life."

After failed attempts to get a federal bill passed, Dennett resigned from the Voluntary Parenthood League in 1925. In 1926, Dennett published *Birth Control Laws: Shall We Keep Them, Change Them, or Abolish Them*, a book that described the state and federal laws surrounding birth control and described Dennett's arguments to change those laws.

After ending her position with the Voluntary Parenthood League, Dennett continued to receive mail from people asking about birth control and sex education. Whenever Dennett attempted to send people her "The Sex Side of Life" pamphlet in unsealed envelopes, which was the common delivery method at the time, the post office confiscated the mail after opening it. Dennett began to use sealed envelopes. In 1928, an alleged woman named Mrs. Carl Miles stated that she had received Dennett's pamphlet by mail and filed a case against Dennett for violating the federal code preventing the mailing of obscene literature. On 29 April 1929, in the case *United States v. Dennett*, the court ruled Dennett's pamphlet obscene and fined her three hundred dollars, which she refused to pay. The court soon discovered that the United States Post Office had created a fake character, Miles, to trick Dennett into mailing a copy of her pamphlet so that they could file a case. On 15 January 1930, Dennett appealed the *United States v. Dennett* ruling, and on 3 March 1930, the original ruling was reversed. The appellate court ruled that because Dennett's intent had been educational and not obscene, the pamphlet did not qualify as obscene.

Dennett's trial was highly publicized. Circulation of her pamphlet, "The Sex Side of Life," increased after the original ruling was reversed. Her trial led more individuals to question the validity of obscenity laws, in particular the Comstock Act. *United States v. Dennett* prompted people to more thoroughly examine materials labeled obscene, left courts questioning censorship by the post office,

and emphasized that not all topics related to sex were socially offensive. Dennett wrote the book *Who's Obscene?* in 1930, describing her account of the trial, and in 1931, she wrote *The Sex Education of Children: A Book for Parents*. After retiring and moving with her son to Woodside, New York, during the middle of the 1930s, Dennett continued to participate in social reform groups. From 1941 to 1944, Dennett helped establish and worked as the chair of the World Federalists, an organization in Woodside that promoted world peace.

In 1945, Dennett moved to Valatie, New York, to live in a nursing home. She died on 25 July 1947 at the age of 75.

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