



AN ESSAY

# The Rivalry Between Margaret Sanger and Mary Ware Dennett

*Scholar Peter C. Engelman, associate editor of the Margaret Sanger Papers, explores primary source content in ProQuest History Vault to reveal the bitter rivalry which shaped the direction of the birth control movement.*



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## Researching the feud between Sanger and Dennett

There was no duel (à la Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton) or tabloid name-calling (in the vein of Joan Crawford and Bette Davis) or dinner party fisticuffs (have another drink! Gore Vidal and Norman Mailer). No, the long battle between Margaret Sanger and Mary Ware Dennett for leadership of the birth control movement was too civilized (most of the time) for any of that. But it was, without a doubt, one of the most intense rivalries in the history of American social protest movements. And it helped determine the course of action for achieving reproductive rights in America.

Dennett and Sanger's on-and-off feud is well documented in two ProQuest History Vault collections: The Margaret Sanger Papers: Smith College Collections and The Papers of Mary Ware Dennett and the Voluntary Parenthood League, part of the Women's Studies Manuscript Collections from The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

ProQuest History Vault offers researchers one-stop access (for the first time) to most of the letters and organizational materials that chronicle this early leadership contest. These voluminous collections are highly searchable and the document images clear and readable. The correspondence in the Smith College Collections, presented chronologically, also offers browsers the added benefit of seeing letters in context, which is helpful for reading between the lines – and outside the margins - of Sanger and Dennett's restrained correspondence; when they criticized each other, it was most often in letters to other movement activists and supporters.

## Conflicting approaches to birth control

The main conflict between Margaret Sanger and Mary Ware Dennett underscores one of the tensions in the birth control movement that persists today: how much power should the medical establishment have over reproductive decision-making?

Dennett and Sanger's differing approaches to medical oversight of contraception provide the first attempt to map the perilous path through legal, medical and ethical mine fields on the way to achieving women's sexual autonomy. Their successors adopted variations on those earlier approaches in a successful effort to secure privacy rights and legal abortion. The documentation on Dennett and Sanger—and these two History Vault collections in general—also offer primary research materials on other subjects central to the early campaign for legalization of birth control, especially free speech issues and the controversial matter (now but not then) of eugenics.

How did this animosity between Sanger and Dennett come about? They were wary of each other from the moment Dennett first joined the birth control cause in 1915, following William Sanger's arrest that winter on obscenity charges for handing an undercover agent a copy of his wife's Family Limitation pamphlet. Dennett (1872-1947), a veteran women's suffrage and antiwar organizer, preferred to work behind the scenes and within the law.

In helping to form the National Birth Control League (NBCL) during Margaret Sanger's exile in Europe, Dennett quickly asserted her leadership and worked to instill order in the chaotic campaign that had arisen around Sanger's free speech clashes with the government. Dennett leveraged the Sanger name and sought access to Sanger's mailing lists even as she refused to support Margaret Sanger's legal defense. Dennett and her allies made no secret of their resentment of Sanger and her autocratic leadership style. They made every effort to distance the NBCL from Sanger's street radicalism and anarchist ties.

*"I am inclined to believe," Sanger wrote about Dennett, "that a sanitarium is the proper place for her."*



Mary Ware Dennett and her sons, 1919.

## The radical and the moderate

During these early years, Sanger (1879-1966), the nurse-turned-radical activist, built a movement out of confrontation and defiance of the law. The only way she knew to awaken the public on the issue of birth control was to make a racket and challenge authority: "I felt myself in the position of one who has discovered that a house is on fire; and I found that it was up to me to shout out the warning!" According to Sanger, Dennett disagreed with "my methods, my tactics, with everything I had done" preferring to "change the laws in an orderly and proper manner." Sanger would have none of it, characterizing Dennett's approach as too incremental, too bourgeois.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the acrimony between them – most of it expressed behind the other's back – Dennett and Sanger had much in common. Both were hard-working single mothers with two sons. They had endured difficult first marriages and personal financial struggles. Both had written controversial publications that met with censorship (Sanger' Woman Rebel and Family Limitation, and Dennett's sex manual, The Sex Side of Life). And they were equally stubborn in refusing to forgive past snubs and slights. Even when months passed with no contact between them, their feud remained on simmer.

Dennett never got very far with the NBCL, which had trouble competing with Sanger's organizations and staying solvent. In 1919, she formed a legislative lobbying group, the Voluntary Parenthood League (VPL). She invited Sanger to serve on the board, knowing Sanger, who had expressed little interest in pressing for legislative change on the national level, would refuse. She did. But what Dennett didn't foresee was Sanger's sudden interest in starting her own lobbying effort to change the federal laws – a clear shift in strategy. Sanger's timing, if not intent, was driven by spite.

In mid-1919, the two leaders issued competing draft bills to remove both state and federal prohibitions on contraception. Dennett backed an "open" bill that would strip all restrictions on contraception and allow anyone to purchase or distribute contraceptives without medical oversight. Her goal was to open the way for women's easy access to affordable birth control. Sanger advocated a "doctors-only" bill that exempted medical professionals from the prohibition. This approach, she believed, would dissolve any remaining association between birth control and indecency and lead to a safe, clinic-based system of contraceptive health care.<sup>2</sup>

As the movement debated the bill proposals, Sanger and Dennett attacked each other in print and in public meetings. Dennett was incensed that Sanger called for medical control of contraception one minute and illegally sent out her do-it-yourself guide, Family Limitation, the next. Sanger called Dennett's bill foolish and dangerous, believing it would lead to the use of ineffective and harmful devices. She also thought Dennett naïve about the socially conservative men's club that was Congress.<sup>3</sup>

Operating in Sanger's shadow much of the time, Dennett failed to gain traction with her message. Objecting to Sanger's call in 1920 for women to go on a five-year birth strike, Dennett resigned her position on the board of the Birth Control Review, cutting herself off from the information hub of the movement.<sup>4</sup> Sanger found ways to isolate Dennett further, leaving her off conference invitations, refusing to publish Dennett's letters to the Birth Control Review, and failing to mention the work of the VPL in public forums, even with Dennett in the audience –prompting Dennett to write about Sanger in a 1920 report: "She was a charming vision in a reddish gown . . . But oh, her English, and her facts that aren't facts, and her logic that isn't logic, and her amazing faculty for being the whole 'moomunt!'"<sup>5</sup>

*Handwritten note:*  
Sanger meeting Mrs. Pillsbury to  
Jan 20<sup>th</sup> at Ave. Club 1920  
Pillsbury (Mrs. Sanger's friend) has advised  
Mrs. Bennett calling Mrs. Pillsbury  
thousands report need a receipt  
Mrs. Sanger's report that Mrs. Pillsbury credit  
about the fact of circulating pamphlets  
that she had written to Mrs. Pillsbury  
to offer her book for sale. Mrs. Pillsbury offered  
to that Sanger to present the expense  
Pillsbury Sanger reports that another offer  
Mrs. Sanger also reports that another offer  
Mrs. Pillsbury to the fact that Mrs. Pillsbury  
that she got the name which Mrs. Pillsbury  
Sanger has had had her paid for  
May 12<sup>th</sup>  
Mrs. Sanger moved according to Mrs. Pillsbury  
Mrs. Pillsbury to the fact that Mrs. Pillsbury  
Mrs. Pillsbury  
Mrs. Pillsbury resigned from the Board group  
as the reason the Board is in a state of  
of the Board on the 5<sup>th</sup> of the fact that Mrs. Pillsbury  
has had while Mrs. Pillsbury has had

AN OPEN LETTER TO MARGARET SANGER,  
NOW, FREDERICK H. GILLETTE, AND THE  
JUDICIARY COMMITTEE OF THE SENATE.

Millions of people are glad that Senator Gillette has sponsored a bill to facilitate the circulation of birth control information and materials. (Senate Bill 4588)

They will be far more grateful, if the bill is amended so as to remove the subject of birth control, at once and for all time, from its present position in the obscenity laws.

There are three potent reasons for amending the Gillette bill. They are to secure expediency, and the toleration if not the actual support of the Catholics.

The aim of the Senator's bill is admirable, namely, to permit the legal circulation of medically authorized contraceptive information and materials. But the bill leaves the whole subject of birth control as indecent as ever, so far as the law is concerned. Decency requires not merely a permit to circulate the "obscene" information, but the complete removal of the subject from all the laws that deal with dirt. Science is clean, not obscene. A clean repeal is the simple necessity for this bill.

Enforceability, in these days, is more than ever a prime requirement for new legislation. The bill as it stands is highly unenforceable. It provides exemption from the obscenity penalties for those engaged in the circulation of medically authorized contraceptive information or materials. But it is obvious that since the government now makes no attempt to enforce the prohibition existing in the obscenity laws, it would not and could not enforce these laws with the proposed Gillette alteration added. The net result of this bill, if passed in its present form, would be the complete letting down of the legal bars to the circulation of contraceptive knowledge and means. That being the case, there is no reason for leaving the subject in the law at all. It makes a mockery of legislation to retain laws which have no real meaning or efficacy.

The present laws as to birth control are a dead letter. Nullification has become general. Boot-legal information and contraceptives circulate among growing millions of citizens. To retain any legal prohibition whatever becomes a mere gesture and pretense, so far as enforceability is concerned. The country is sufficiently loaded down already with laws which are honored only by being broken. To deliberately pass more such laws would be a deliberate lapse in legislative responsibility.

only the merit of being the one kind of legislation which loyal Catholics can put up with, but it is the only legislation which support of a birth control measure should disturb their Catholic bill is open to logical Catholic opposition, but taking the whole subject of birth control out of law is a step which no Catholic can reasonably oppose. It seems quite a happy situation then, that what is wise as legislation should also be expedient politically.

A clean repeal amendment to the Gillette bill thus has back of it reasons of practicability, good citizenship and see fit. It is to be hoped that the Judiciary Committee will that Congress will do itself the great honor of passing the simplified measure, before adjournment. It would greatly enhance the record of the Seventy-first Congress, just before it passes into history.

MARY WARE DENNETT  
81 Sanger Street  
Astoria, O. I.  
New York City

February 11, 1921.

## Final battles that shaped the future of birth control

The friction between them sparked fire at the close of the First American Birth Control Conference in New York, in 1921. It started with a behind-the-scenes clash over Dennett's role in the Sanger-run conference and a jostling for the support of British birth controller Marie Stopes. To Stopes, Sanger wrote that Dennett lacked medical backing for her work and was operating "outside the pale of honesty & decency."<sup>6</sup> Upon learning these disparagements, Dennett accused Sanger of "libel and slander."

It all boiled over following Sanger's arrest at the Town Hall theater after she refused police orders to shut down a public meeting. Dennett, seeking publicity for the VPL, appeared at the police station to give a public statement in support of Sanger. But Sanger's close friend and movement supporter, Juliet Rublee, indignant over Dennett's attempt to exploit the situation, apparently struck Dennett in the face, saying "This is our affair, we don't want you in it."<sup>7</sup> Rublee later denied it, and Sanger backed her up. "I am inclined to believe," she wrote about Dennett, "that a sanitarium is the proper place for her." Sanger went a step further by accusing Dennett of tipping off the police about Sanger's illegal mailing of contraceptive pamphlets.<sup>8</sup>

The conference marked Dennett's last public appearance in the mainstream of the birth control movement, now fully under Sanger's direction. Dennett retreated to her lobbying work in Washington and stayed in the background until Sanger launched a new lobbying organization and focused on passing a birth control bill in Congress in the early 1930s. The two revisited their old battle over the best approach to legislative reform. Dennett characterized Sanger's proposed bill as "unenforceable," "a mockery." Sanger shot back, "You had your day, you had the open field, and we are still cleaning up the messy confusion in Washington as a result of [your] 'open bill.'" More damning for Dennett was that Sanger then largely ignored her, in essence cutting Dennett completely adrift from movement.<sup>9</sup>

Sanger's preferred approach of embracing clinic-based and physician-prescribed birth control won out in the end, paving the way for the American Medical Association's endorsement of contraception in 1937 and a series of court decisions upholding contraception – and later abortion – as a legitimate and necessary health practice.

For all intents and purposes, Sanger shoved Dennett to the fringe (not quite like Stalin banished Trotsky, but with the same bad blood coursing through) and got in the last word in a contentious and historic rivalry that cast both women in an ugly light.

*"You had your day, you had the open field, and we are still cleaning up the messy confusion in Washington as a result of [your] 'open bill.'"*

*Margaret Sanger to Mary Ware Dennett*

COMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LEGISLATION  
Formed to secure amendment of Federal Laws  
which obstruct the administration of State  
laws relating to birth control.

17 West 16 st.  
New York City

February  
21st.  
1931

Mrs. Mary Ware Dennett  
81 Singer St.  
Astoria, L.I.

Dear Mrs. Dennett:

Yours of February 11th. with your open letter received.

It is really unbelievable that one has as much information as you have should use the Catholic argument and urge the "open Bill". It is incredible.

If you had been to the hearing on February 14th and had heard the slurs of the opposition directed at the "open bill", you might have changed your mind. In fact, there was no argument whatsoever based on the "Doctors' Bill" by the opposition, and the whole non-Catholic element present at the hearing was there because of the mis-statement on the part of the National Catholic Welfare Conference's claim that your bill of 1925 was under discussion.

I later went around to see an official high up in Methodist circles, who stated that this "Doctors' Bill" put an entirely different color on the whole question, and that he was not against this form of legislation.

Many people who received your confusing, unsportsmanlike letter agree that if you are out of the running, why not stay out and give the others a chance to win out. You had your day, you had the open field, and we are still cleaning up the messy confusion in Washington as a result of the "open Bill".

Sincerely yours,  
(Signed) Margaret Sanger  
National Chairman



## About Peter C. Engelman

Peter C. Engelman is associate editor at the Margaret Sanger Papers Project and author of: *A History of the Birth Control Movement in America* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2011). Engelman started at the Sanger Papers Project as a graduate research assistant in 1989. He has a B.A. from Connecticut College, an M.A. in American History from NYU, and is a graduate of NYU's Program in Archival Management and Historical Editing. He also received training in historical editing at the NHPRC's Editing Institute. Peter worked for the Project at the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College. He was engaged in all facets of editing work, including selection, research and writing, grant research and writing, and was responsible for writing and editing the Project's Newsletter.

For more info, visit: [https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/project/Peter\\_Engelman.php](https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/project/Peter_Engelman.php)

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### NOTES:

(1) Sanger, "Hotel Brevoort Speech, Jan. 17, 1916, in Katz, Hajo, Engelman, eds., *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Volume 1: The Woman Rebel, 1900-1928* [Urbana, 2003], 179; Sanger, *An Autobiography* [New York, 1938], 180.

(2) See especially, ProQuest History Vault, Folder: 002681-070-0754, Collection: Margaret Sanger Papers—Smith College Collections; Title: Margaret Sanger, "How Shall We Change the Law," *Birth Control Review* [May 1919]: 18.

(3) See especially, Sanger's articles and speeches at the time in ProQuest History Vault, Folder: 002681-070-0754; Collection: Margaret Sanger Papers—Smith College Collections; and Part II, Chapter 6 in Dennett's book, *Birth Control Laws, 1926* in Folder: 002704-027-0704; Collection: Women's Studies Manuscript Collections from The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Series 3: Sexuality, Sex Education, and Reproductive Rights, Part B: The Papers of Mary Ware Dennett and the Voluntary Parenthood League.

(4) See ProQuest History Vault, Folder: 002681-062-0446; Collection: Margaret Sanger Papers—Smith College Collections; Title: *Birth Control Review*/New York Women's Publishing Company Minutes January 20, 1920.

(5) ProQuest History Vault, Folder: 002704-012-0490; Collection: Women's Studies Manuscript Collections from The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Series 3: Sexuality, Sex Education, and Reproductive Rights, Part B: The Papers of Mary Ware Dennett and the Voluntary Parenthood League; Title: Mary Ware Dennett, Congressional Report, Dec. 16, 1920.

(6) ProQuest History Vault, Folder: 002679-001-0723; Collection: Margaret Sanger Papers—Collected Documents; Title: Margaret Sanger to Marie Stopes, July 29, 1921.

(7) ProQuest History Vault, Folder: 002704-014-0327; Collection: Women's Studies Manuscript Collections from The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Series 3: Sexuality, Sex Education, and Reproductive Rights, Part B: The Papers of Mary Ware Dennett and the Voluntary Parenthood League; Title: Mary Ware Dennett, Statement regarding Mrs. Sanger's arrest at the Town Hall Meeting, November 13, 1921.

(8) ProQuest History Vault, Folder: 002679-001-0889; Collection: Margaret Sanger Papers—Collected Documents; Title: Margaret Sanger to Henry John Gibbons, December 7, 1921.

(9) ProQuest History Vault, Folder: 002704-019-0680; Collection: Women's Studies Manuscript Collections from The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Series 3: Sexuality, Sex Education, and Reproductive Rights, Part B: The Papers of Mary Ware Dennett and the Voluntary Parenthood League; Titles: Mary Ware Dennett to Margaret Sanger, February 11, 1931 and Margaret Sanger to Mary Ware Dennett, February 21, 1931.



# BIRTH CONTROL LAWS SHALL WE KEEP THEM CHANGE THEM OR ABOLISH THEM

BY

MARY WARE DENNETT

*One of the Founders of the National Birth Control League,  
Formerly Director of the Voluntary Parenthood  
League, Author of "The Sex Side of Life"*

*The Birth Control Review*

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## How Shall We Change The Law

*By Margaret Sanger.*

APPALLING SITUATIONS revealed every day indicate all too plainly that in cases where a woman's disease is affected by pregnancy, the medical institutions and clinics of New York State are accomplishing nothing to relieve those diseased conditions. Where the disease is tuberculosis, syphilis or some other organic malady which is aggravated by pregnancy, women appeal in vain for instruction concerning contraceptives. Physicians are willing to perform abortions where they are pronounced necessary, but they refuse to direct the use of preventives which would make the abortions unnecessary. The almost invariable reply to the appeals of their women patients is: "I can't do it—the law does not permit it." Recent inquiries made of physicians leave no doubt as to the accuracy of this statement. Medical practitioners are heavily handicapped—especially in institutional and public work—by Section 1142 of the New York State law which prohibits anyone whatsoever from communicating to any person information concerning contraceptives.

RECOGNIZING THIS condition of affairs and the tremendous evils to individual women, to children and to the whole social body, various groups and organizations have attempted, in the past four or five years, to secure amendments to the law.

Within the Birth Control movement there have been two distinct opinions as to what sort of an amendment should be urged. One opinion has favored what has been called the "unlimited bill". This measure would so amend the law as to permit anyone who chose to do so to impart information concerning contraceptives to anyone who wishes it. It would accomplish this end simply by striking the words "prevention of conception" out of Section 1142. The amendment favored by other Birth Control advocates would allow doctors, and possibly midwives and nurses, to instruct in the use of contraceptives.

The time has now come to analyze both of these proposed plans and make up our minds finally and definitely which one we support. In arriving at our conclusion we must

knowledge, experience or ability, shall have the right to advise as to the use of means of preventing conception?

Personally, I object to the so-called "unlimited bill." My objection, however, is not the usual one, that it would increase immorality. I do not believe that a universal knowledge of contraceptives would lead to immorality. On the other hand, I do believe that when instruction in the use of contraceptives is given, it should be given by the kind of persons best suited by training and experience to give it scientifically and accurately. If everyone is permitted to impart information, those who receive it have no guaranty that it is correct or suitable to the individual's physical requirements. Incorrect, unscientific information may bring good results in some cases, but it is more likely to cause a vast amount of disappointment and anxiety in others.

A BILL WHICH WOULD authorize physicians, nurses and midwives to impart information would meet this need. These classes of persons are equipped with the physiological and other knowledge to make the results of contraceptives dependable.

A second point in favor of the Doctor's and Nurse's bill is that it brings the applicant for contraceptives into direct touch with the person giving the information. This, of course, means direct instructions, and specific information suitable to the individual case. It means that the important factors of health, physiological structure, temperament and economic condition can be considered and their requirements accurately met.

A third point that must not be overlooked is that under such a measure it would be possible to get statistics of cases handled, methods applied, and results obtained. Thus there will be no guesswork as to what methods are the most reliable for certain cases. Thus, too, will those who give instruction improve upon present methods and develop new and superior ones. A system of disseminating information which depends largely upon neighbors, friends and kindly relatives is not likely to give the best results. Neither is it likely to improve methods and develop more desirable ones. I do not

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