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Martha J. Lamb (1826-1893) Brought American History to Life

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Through her writings and editorial work, Martha J. Lamb (1826-1893) did more to foster widespread interest in American history than perhaps any other individual in the Nineteenth century. She achieved national recognition as the editor of the *Magazine of American History*, the only publication devoted solely to this broad topic in its day. The preacher Henry Ward Beecher considered the magazine an "historical gold mine" and historian Francis Parkman claimed, "every student of American history has a stake in its success and prosperity."¹ The legacy of Martha Lamb's work has endured into this century. Yet, her name is barely remembered today.

American History: An Emerging Field

Interest in American history peaked in the United States during the last quarter of the 19th century when the nation celebrated the centennial of its birth. Having recently emerged from a divisive civil war which threatened the nation, Americans were eager to know their past and explore the early history of their country. With a national expansion in literacy and publication activity, improvements in transportation, and more rapid communication, the country was becoming more closely connected. An increasingly literate American citizenry also felt a greater sense of national pride and their collective identity.

In the 1870s, the nation's elementary and secondary schools began requiring the study of American history as part of the basic curriculum. Americans studying abroad with English, French and German scholars were also learning historical methodologies. Upon their return, these professionally trained historians were eager to investigate the history of the United States. This cadre of historians gave legitimacy to research in the emerging field of American history. These factors, plus the demise of Dawson's *Historical Magazine* (1857-1875), led publisher A. S. Barnes and Co. to seize the opportunity and begin his new historical journal to be called the *Magazine of American History, with Notes and Queries*.²

Most contemporaneous historical journals had been financially underwritten and issued under the auspices of the various historical and genealogical societies of the country. Whereas these publications tended to focus on the history of individual states, regions of the country, or family lineage, Barnes' magazine would veer in a different direction. Not only would his magazine be profitable, but it would also have

national appeal. When Barnes issued a prospectus announcing his new publication, he knew the difficulties faced by others. He was confident, however, that the *Magazine of American History* could be profitable and successful. Historians George Bancroft and Francis Parkman endorsed the new enterprise.

The Coming of the Woman Editor

The inaugural issue of the *Magazine of American History* in January 1877, edited by author and librarian John Austin Stevens, contained a review of Martha J. Lamb's serialized *History of the City of New York* (parts I-VII). Stevens' first issue set a pattern for the magazine that would always include: original articles; the text or even a facsimile of original documents — some of which might be in private hands; proceedings of various societies; illustrations; queries and replies; book reviews and literary notices.

Under his tenure the magazine's circulation grew. The next co-editors, Reverend Benjamin F. De Costa and Professor Henry Phelps Johnston, maintained the format begun by John Austin Stevens, and each wrote consistently for the magazine during their brief tenure (1881-1883). When De Costa and Johnson relinquished the editorial reins, the publisher's dilemma was how to continue the financially struggling magazine he had so long nurtured. In the end, Barnes sold the *Magazine of American History* to the Historical Publication Co. and eventually persuaded author Martha J. Lamb to fill the editorial void.

That Martha J. Lamb was asked to edit a magazine in 1883 was hardly unusual. More than 850 American women edited an array of newspapers, magazines and journals across the country in the 19th century.³ Barnes' personal selection of Lamb as editor for continuation of the *Magazine of American History* indicates his high professional regard for her and her abilities. That Barnes' sentiment was so widely shared in the historical community can only be appreciated by knowing what attributes and affiliations Lamb brought to the position.

Martha J. Lamb: An Inquiring Mind

Martha J. Lamb, who was to become the first woman editor of a national historical publication in the United States, was born Martha Joanna Reade Nash in Plainfield, Massachusetts

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on August 13, 1826. Her mother (Lucinda Vinton) was of French Huguenot extraction and her father (Arvin Nash) could trace his ancestry back to England through a Mayflower settler. Martha's early schooling, under the tutelage of classical scholar George M. Burgess, helped develop her writing fluency and a proclivity for mathematics. Subsequently, she studied at Williston Seminary (for males and females) in Easthampton, Massachusetts. Upon completing her education, she began teaching in Massachusetts, in New Jersey and ultimately at Pollock Institute (location undetermined) where she became chair of mathematics. In an autobiographical essay she later wrote about herself, Martha credited an understanding of the principles of mathematics with enabling her to "distinguish the essential from the non-essential" and in assisting in her "habits of concentrated attention." She also credited her "acquaintance with European history ... varied reading, especially my study of the poets... and the growth and expansion of American literature" as "an influential part in shaping my literary and historical tastes."⁴

Martha's cousin Amelia C. Waite (whose husband Morrison Waite later became the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court) persuaded her to accept a teaching post in Maumee, Ohio (near Toledo). Teaching was one of the few employment options for educated women at the time. When Martha met and married the widower and furniture salesman Charles A. Lamb in 1852, she subsequently left teaching to devote her energies to their home and his two young daughters. During this time, she participated in the local Ladies Literary Society and wrote short essays on such controversial topics as voting rights for women, the abolition of capital punishment, and the benefit of the monetary credit system. She used the pen name of Emogene when contributing her essays and poetry to *The Ladies Offering*.⁵

Entering The Public Sphere

In 1858, the Lambs relocated to Chicago. Here Martha assumed the role of club-woman described by Karen J. Blair as being "adventurous... motivated by circumstance or uncontrollable talent and energy... to explore avenues unknown to most women."⁶

Martha ventured beyond the private sphere of home, to partake in the literary societies frequented by cultured, genteel, middle-class ladies. She used her energies in a more public way, involving herself in some of the city's most prominent charitable institutions.

Her painful awareness of the pressing social problems facing helpless women and children in Chicago made her a prime mover in the organization of the Home for the Friendless

and the Half-Orphan Asylum. She also served as Secretary of the Ladies Industrial School Association.

As the Civil War loomed, Lamb's considerable executive ability was again tapped. She was installed as Secretary of the great Northwestern Sanitary Fair of 1863, presided over by Mary A. Livermore (later co-editor of *Agitator* and then *Women's Journal*). The tragedy of the nation's Civil War galvanized individuals, businesses, political organizations and religious societies in Chicago to lend their support. In all, the Fair collected an abundance of clothing, fresh produce and some \$100,000 to help relieve the suffering of Union soldiers. A large share of the Fair's success was attributed to Martha's dedication and skill.⁷

The New York Years

In 1867, in poor health and with limited means, Martha left her husband and relocated to New York City. Martha's diary does not discuss her marriage or the conditions precipitating the break with her husband. In fact, pages appear to be cut from the diary about what must have been matters too personal for her or her descendents (who inherited her papers) to share. During her recuperation, she indulged her interest in local history and read about her new home city. The story of New York captivated her, and she began taking copious notes with the hope she might one day write a comprehensive history of the city.

Martha's writing during this time provided a congenial means of self-support. Capitalizing on a ready market for children's books, Lamb turned her attention to producing *The Play School Stories for Little People* in four volumes (Gould & Lincoln, 1869) which was soon followed by *Aunt Mattie's Library*, also a four-volume project (D. Lothrop & Co., 1871). Two years later, she used her first-hand acquaintance with Chicago to write the novel *Spicy* (D. Appleton & Co., 1873), praised for its description of the work of the Sanitary Fair and for its graphic portrayal of the great Chicago fire of 1871. No doubt flowing from her experiences of sharing works-in-progress at literary societies, we learn from her personal journal that Lamb read chapters from her *Spicy* manuscript to historian Davis Brodhead and his wife; and that he read his manuscript to her.⁸

During her New York residency, Lamb wrote prolifically in diverse genres: prose, short stories, and poetry, often using pen names. Her bylines appeared in such contemporary magazines of the day as: *Andrew's Bazaar*, *Art Journal*, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, *Scribner's Monthly*, and *St. Nicholas*. A series of Martha Lamb's articles, originally appearing in *Art Journal*, proved so popular that they were published as *Homes of America* (D. Appleton, 1879). Her literary reputation was growing.

While Martha was, of necessity, engaged in producing a continuous stream of publishable work, she was also participating in charitable and association activities. Her wide-ranging interests led to her eventual installation in twenty-seven historical, civic, and cultural organizations. These included: the Society of the Colonial Dames (which she helped found); Sorosis (the first women's club); The New-York Historical Society (where she was the first woman granted membership); the New York Genealogical & Biographical Society; the Union League Club; the Charity Organization Society for the City of New York; the Nineteenth Century Club and the Huguenot Society of America.

Martha took her association involvements seriously. She regularly attended meetings and was often at the center of initial planning and sponsored activities. An example would be her work for the Huguenot Society of America. Herself of Huguenot descent, she was particularly interested in the development of the Society's library. As chair of the library committee, she secured the support of Melvil Dewey, then librarian-in-chief at Columbia College, and by 1891 saw the collection grow to some 800 volumes.⁹ Her high profile in charitable and organizational activities gave Martha a wide network of friends and acquaintances throughout the city.

Being of Huguenot and Mayflower lineage afforded her access to some of New York City's oldest families. In a very real sense, her lineage facilitated her most ambitious literary project. Through fifteen years of painstaking research and sifting through primary sources, Martha Lamb produced *The History of the City of New York; Its Origin, Rise and Progress* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1877 and 1880). Reaction to her monumental two-volume work was uniformly enthusiastic both in the United States and abroad. Praised for its accuracy and flowing narrative, the work, which secured her reputation in historical circles, was originally to be published under the pen name Nash Vinton. One learns from Henry B. Barnes that A.S. Barnes & Co. was concerned about the anticipated reception to a work of such importance by a woman:

When the enterprise [*History of the City of New York*] was first proposed to us, we had serious misgivings as to her strength and ability to carry out so herculean a task. We had no data for such an undertaking by a woman and how the public would receive it, when completed, was decidedly a problem. Would not the prejudice against women authors, which even George Eliot and George Sand could not brave be a serious obstacle to the success of Mrs. Lamb? These and other difficulties presented themselves to our minds when considering the propriety of investing in the enterprise, and had to be wholly overcome by the unalterable courage and faith of Mrs. Lamb before we found ourselves willing to embark...¹⁰

Martha's *History of the City of New York* was an unqualified success which garnered much attention and put her in demand as a speaker by most of the organizations in which she held memberships. Sorosis, the first professional women's club in the country, honored Lamb with a reception at Delmonico's on May 12, 1881 at which time she delivered a paper about women in history. The reception for Mrs. Lamb was the first time that a literary woman worker had been so honored.¹¹ The respect accorded her work and her new-found prominence paved the way for Martha's next major undertaking. It was in her capacity as editor of the *Magazine of American History* that her fluid writing, concentration, and ability to distinguish the essential from the non-essential were to be most fully tested.

The Magazine of American History: A New Challenge

When Martha J. Lamb accepted the editorship of the faltering *Magazine of American History*, she took on the major challenge of her life. As difficult as her *History of the City of New York* had been to produce, she had never before had to concern herself about the promotion of a magazine, the need for generating subscribers, the quality of other authors' manuscript submissions, or even in dealing with over-saturation in coverage on particular topics which prompted the following rejection letter:

The return of your manuscript does not imply any want of appreciation of its merits—but we have published more or less about Aaron Burr, all that we esteem desirable at present, and we are moreover very much crowded with material that has been a long time in waiting.¹²

As editor, Martha was responsible for all aspects of the magazine's content, production, distribution, advertising, and finances. She viewed her magazine as an excellent vehicle for the promotion of knowledge about American history and wanted to dispel the notion that Americans did not have a history worth knowing. She considered the paucity of teacher training and the scant attention and lifeless treatment given to American history in the schools to be a "serious evil."¹³ Hearing first-hand accounts of the American Revolution from her grandfather kindled her life-long interest in history. Additionally, the fact that she had actually lived and traveled extensively in three distinct regions of the country gave her broad familiarity with the changing nation. Like publisher Barnes, she was committed to fostering the "educational work which this...only periodical of its kind in the land was expected to perform."¹⁴

Under her editorship, the *Magazine of American History* followed the structure originally established by the founding

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editors, all men. There were signed articles, notes and queries, obituaries, book reviews, original documents, and society proceedings. Martha, however, used many more engraved illustrations than had previous editors. Her society proceedings and announcements, too, cast a wider net and were a barometer of the prevailing concerns and activities of historical societies stretching across the country. Martha Lamb's May 1883 inaugural issue was praised as an "admirable specimen of editorial judgment and typographical art [which gives] rich promise for the future."¹⁵ In this issue, Lamb herself wrote the first of what would be a three part series on the history of Wall Street. This article, alone, was illustrated with fourteen striking maps, portraits and original drawings.¹⁶ Encouraged by the enthusiastic response to her first issue, Martha continued in a similar vein for subsequent issues of the magazine, always using etched portraits or engravings to enhance the feature articles. At all times, she wanted to communicate the great strides made within the nation in a clear, engaging way. With the purchase of the *Magazine of American History*, along with her nephew Eugene S. Miller, Martha Lamb set its course in her own personal style.¹⁷

History Comes Alive

Martha J. Lamb humanized history. She made America's leaders accessible to her readers through articles such as: "Our Presidents as Horsemen" (June 1887); "President Lincoln's Humor" (July 1890); and a reminiscence on "The Great Soldier Also An Artist" in which the reader learns that Ulysses S. Grant had "artistic taste and talent" and even "painted well" (September 1890). A more serious two-part article, by Martha Lamb herself, gave a political framework for an understanding of "Unsuccessful Candidates for the Presidency of the Nation" (November and December 1884).

Martha wanted the nation's story to come alive through knowledge of its people. Whether it was artist Benjamin West, senator and orator Stephen A. Douglas, Union general William T. Sherman, Confederate President Jefferson Davis, industrialist and inventor Peter Cooper or a contemporary such as politician Roscoe Conkling, the *Magazine of American History* was sure to explain their contributions. Even educator Emma Willard's life was celebrated in the reporting of a 70th Jubilee of the founding of the Troy Female Seminary, the first school for the higher education of women in the country (December 1891).

Promoting Historical Scholarship

One of the hallmarks of the *Magazine of American History* was its featuring of original sources. Upon publishing an

article about the sale of a Negro woman in colonial New York, the magazine received a transcribed copy, from a reader, about a 1723 sale of another Negro woman and boy in Melrose, Massachusetts (July 1884). Martha's concern with fidelity to the original text is perhaps most tellingly demonstrated in the article "Unpublished Washington Letters" in which original George Washington's letters are compared with those reproduced in historian Jared Sparks' *The Writings of Washington*. Direct examination of the letters held in the British Museum revealed that Sparks took editorial license in presenting Washington's letters, changing our first president's grammar and even in substituting words which he preferred in their stead (January 1884).

Factual accounts on all of the nation's great wars and battles were covered in the *Magazine of American History*. The American Civil War articles, in particular, attracted widespread interest offering the perspectives of generals who had served two decades earlier.

The magazine also educated readers about the various states in the union and even the rationale for the location of the nation's capitol (January 1884). Capturing the spirit of the times, transportation also received due attention in articles such as "Glimpses of the Railroad History" (June 1891) and "Steam Navigation 1807-1892" (September 1892).

The *Magazine of American History* played an important role in documenting the roots of American history as a separate field of study. One learns in an interview with the eminent German historian Leopold Von Ranke (December 1883) of the typical European training of such American historians as George Bancroft. When there was a call to organize an American Historical Association (AHA), Martha Lamb promoted its goals by publishing their full prospectus in the magazine (August 1884). Charles Adams' survey "Recent Historical Work in the Colleges and Universities of Europe and America" (February 1890) was later followed in the magazine by AHA President John Jay's "The Demand for Education in American History" (February 1891). A member of the AHA who frequently attended their conferences, Martha Lamb published many papers originally delivered at their meetings as articles in her magazine. She also faithfully reviewed and publicized the monographs produced by AHA members.

Lamb recognized that her readers were interested not only in the latest historical publications being produced but also in works that exerted a strong influence on the country. One such pivotal publication discussed was Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (January 1890).

Many historical societies were forming during the period in which the *Magazine of American History* was being published.

Reflective of this trend, the secretary of the Oneida Historical Society contributed a useful list of over one hundred historical societies across the country and their dates of founding to the magazine (August 1884). Martha Lamb's profile of the New-York Historical Society (September 1886) gave readers insights into one of the leading organizations in the country and explained how historical materials were increasingly moving from private hands into historical repositories. This factor augured well for expanded research and study possibilities.

In smaller ways, too, Martha engaged her reader. She reprinted, for example, "Exercises in American History" (twenty questions of basic facts) from the *Southwestern Journal of Education*; and "Sixty Waymarks in the World Progress" which listed historical events from 2234 B.C. -1866 A.D. (August 1890). The byline for the latter was Vinton Reade, another Lamb pseudonym drawn from family names in her own lineage. Under the "Minor Matters" section of her magazine, Lamb might include the origin of a phrase such as "mind your p's and q's" (August 1883) or report on events of historic interest, such as the dedication of the Statue of Liberty or the 250th anniversary celebration of Harvard College (January 1887). Over the next twenty volumes, Lamb would write on some ninety different subjects under her own name. More than at any time in her career, Lamb's writing and ability to focus were put to the test as she struggled to meet monthly publication deadlines.

A Life Well Lived

Despite all the editorial pressures and marketing responsibilities that she had, Lamb was truly happy in her work. In her diary, she writes:

What a wonderful life is mine! Who dreams that I sit here in the summer heat all this long Sunday, putting the final touches upon my historic article on Riverside Park! Not only that, but watching the hours to see how much time is to be left for 'book Notices' for September 1.¹⁸

Although she had been chronically ill much of her life, being at the nexus of all historical scholarship activities placed Lamb in an enviable position for a woman of her time. She regularly received correspondence about historical matters from all across the country. Individuals sent her original documents, clippings and family papers, trusting that she would understand their value and could hopefully transmit their significance to posterity. Lamb knew all of the leading personalities and writers of her day. Increasingly, the *Magazine of American History* became the forum for the exchange and transmission of historical information about the nation as a whole when no other journal of the day was filling this unique need.

At one point, Martha wished to relinquish her responsibilities as the magazine's editor and apparently approached Theodore Roosevelt, then the U. S. Civil Service Commissioner. A gracious Roosevelt, who had actually contributed to the *Magazine of American History* himself, declined the offer while saying:

Your magazine is literally unique, and it has been and is doing a most admirable work for American history; and I most sincerely hope you will on no account sever your connection with it.¹⁹

Martha J. Lamb continued as editor of the *Magazine* with her individual issues averaging some one hundred and twenty pages each. Her Civil War issues in 1886, in particular, sold out and required reprinting of 13,000 copies to keep up with demand.²⁰ These issues, alone, did a great deal to attract widespread national and even international interest to her *Magazine*. By 1890, the *Magazine* reached an annual circulation of some 3,500 (not including the sale of individual issues by mail, at stands or from dealers) at a subscription rate of \$5 per year.²¹

The January 1893 issue of the *Magazine of American History* was the last edited by Martha J. Lamb. At the end of December, 1892 after putting final touches on the upcoming issue, she caught pneumonia and died on January 2, 1893. The National Historical Company bought the *Magazine* from Lamb's heirs as January, 1893 ended. The *Magazine* continued through the September, 1893 issue but was then suspended. Finding an editorial candidate of Lamb's ilk was evidently too formidable a task.

The loss of the *Magazine* bearing Martha J. Lamb's imprint left a void in historical documentation unfilled until the American Historical Association began issuing its own publication in 1895. Professional historians, who had previously contributed to the *Magazine of American History*, allied themselves with the AHA and sent their manuscripts to the new *American Historical Review*.

A Woman Historian Ahead of her Time

Martha J. Lamb and the *Magazine of American History* are inextricably connected. As its editor, she raised the profile of the languishing magazine, making it accessible to both the informed reader and the cadre of amateur and professional historians of the late 19th century. Martha recognized that people needed to know their leaders, their institutions, and the conflicts that shaped the development of the nation. History was a living entity to her; and she shared her enthusiasm for its richness with others. Giving the American people knowledge of themselves was an educational mission that she took seriously. A combination of broad literary training,

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extensive knowledge of history and numerous association involvements, served her well as editor of the only magazine devoted exclusively to the entirety of American history in its time. Lamb made her magazine profitable and garnered widespread respect for her efforts in publishing circles. Martha was picked by the Public Opinion Co. of Washington, D.C. as a "Representative Moulder of Public Opinion."²² This distinction ranked her as one of the forty-six principal magazine editors in the United States. Notably, she was also the only woman selected.

The Magazine of American History played a significant role in: solidifying an audience for material on American history; fostering the growth of the American Historical Association; and in promoting the development of the history profession in the United States. Martha J. Lamb used the magazine to educate Americans about their history. Through her considerable skill in this enterprise, she debunked the "man's preserve" myth, exemplifying the contributions that a woman is capable of making in any sphere.

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NOTES

¹ "Magazine of American History" [advertising brochure]. Martha J. Lamb Papers, Box 7, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College (Northampton, MA).

² Though Dawson's *Historical Magazine With Notes and Queries* (1857-1875) had also been a successful commercial production, its focus was mainly on New England, New York and Pennsylvania. Additionally, its articles were often reprints from other journals. Its notes and queries section, too, imitated the British journal *Notes and Queries* that frequently made up half of its content in each issue.

³ Sherilyn Cox Bennion, "A Working List of Women Editors of the 19th Century West," *Journalism Quarterly* 7 (Summer, 1980): 60-65. For a more comprehensive list of 19th century women editors, see Patricia Okker, *Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century American Women Editors* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1995). Appendix: 167-221.

⁴ Martha J. Lamb, "Formative Influences," *The Forum* 9 (March, 1891): 57-58.

⁵ For essays and poetry that Martha J. Lamb submitted to *The Ladies Offering*, see Martha J. Lamb Papers, Box 7, Sophia Smith Collection.

⁶ Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980), 23.

⁷ Mrs. [Jane Cunningham] Croly, "Mrs. Martha J. Lamb, The Historian and Editor of the *Magazine of American History*," *Godey's Lady's Book* CXV, #689 (1893): 351

⁸ *Martha J. Lamb Personal Journal*. See loose manuscript page dated 25 January 1872. Martha J. Lamb Papers, Box 2, Sophia Smith Collection.

⁹ Huguenot Society of America [file]. Martha J. Lamb Papers, Box 1, New-York Historical Society Library (New York, NY).

¹⁰ The excerpt is from the manuscript of Henry B. Barnes' talk given at the Sorosis reception honoring Martha J. Lamb on 12 May 1881. In: Martha J. Lamb Papers, Box 3, New-York Historical Society

¹¹ *Godey's Lady's Book*, op cit., 353.

¹² Letter from Martha J. Lamb dated 11 July 1889. Martha J. Lamb Papers, Box 9, New-York Historical Society

¹³ See Lamb's review of Frances Newton Thorp's "Nation: American History in American Schools, Colleges and Universities," (University of Pennsylvania, 1886) [pamphlet]. *Magazine of American History* XVII, #2 (February, 1887): 184.

¹⁴ Martha J. Lamb, "Alfred Smith Barnes," *Magazine of American History* XIX (May, 1888): 373.

¹⁵ "Mrs. Martha J. Lamb," *Demorest's Monthly Magazine* 19 (July, 1883): 597.

¹⁶ Martha J. Lamb's articles on Wall Street were published in the May, June and July, 1883 issues of the *Magazine of American History*. Later the series was published as *Wall Street in History* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1883). Lamb received a 15 percent royalty from Funk and Wagnall's on the sale of the book. Martha J. Lamb Papers, Box 5, Sophia Smith Collection.

¹⁷ Historical Publication Co. stock certificates. Martha J. Lamb Papers, Box 1, Sophia Smith Collection. The date of purchase is unclear.

¹⁸ See the *Martha J. Lamb Diary* for the entry dated 16 August 1885. Martha J. Lamb Papers, Sophia Smith Collection.

¹⁹ Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Martha J. Lamb dated 20 May 1890. Martha J. Lamb Papers, Box 5, Sophia Smith Collection.

²⁰ Letter to Historical Publishing Co. from J. J. Little & Co., dated 11 February 1887. Martha J. Lamb Papers, Box 7, New-York Historical Society.

²¹ N. W. Ayer & Sons, *American Newspaper Annual* (Philadelphia: N.W. Ayer & Sons, 1891), 509.

²² 'Representative Moulders of Public Opinion,' *New York Recorder* 5 October 1891. Martha J. Lamb Papers, Box 5, Sophia Smith Collection.