YOURS FOR RIGHT, IN ACTION AS IN THOUGHT . . .

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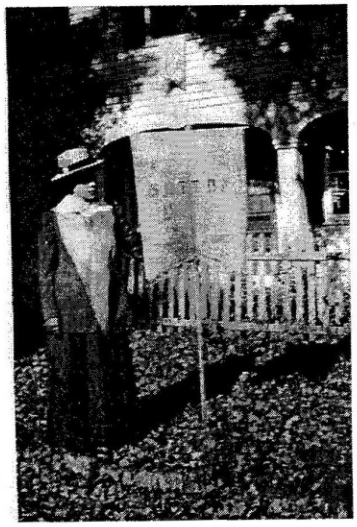

Lucy Waters Phelps (1876-1965), of West Sutton, was called a prophetess; she believed that when women gained the vote, "the hand that rocks the cradle" would indeed rule the world, and that it was up to women to "cradle Loyalty in homes and schools."[1] Lucy Stone, of West Brookfield, had used those words almost 70 years earlier at the beginning of the long struggle. Like many female reformers, both Lucys began their careers in the only acceptable public sphere—teaching in small, rural, public and private schools. For these women, knowledge, oration, writing, management skills, and authority in the classroom led to improving society and themselves.

Freethinker

Phelps was influenced by her uncle, Jason Waters, a "visionary" state legislator during the Civil War who sponsored legislation to remove the "whites only" clause for military service and advocated woman's right to vote.[2] He introduced freethinking to his niece, his students, and patrons of the West Sutton Library by subscribing to *The Truth Seeker,* a liberal newspaper. Phelps began her career as an activist when she wrote a letter to this paper in 1887, at age ten, in celebration of America's independence.[3]

Her parents, Julia and Henry H. Phelps, also shaped her intellectual growth. From Congregational and Baptist origins, they veered "toward infidelity and spiritualism": "My parents worked their way out of what superstitions they were reared in and their children have the benefit of that."[4] Many mid-19th- century reformers underwent a similar shift away from religious traditions, which is why they were called "infidels."

At 18, Phelps began teaching in various "ungraded" Sutton district schools and eventually became the West Sutton librarian. As a freethinker, she chose the path of a reformer, "sincerely striving for the emancipation of other minds from the slavery of immorality as well as from that of superstition.... It is better to exercise one's mind on the side one honestly believes to be right (may it seem right or wrong to me), than to allow it to remain idle and dormant."[5] On her 20th birthday, Phelps wrote: "I am alone in my thoughts and ideas here, among the young people, but that does not discourage me."[6] Instead, she widened her circle by forming the Liberal Correspondence Club, exchanging letters with members across the country on topics like prohibition, woman's suffrage, morality, temperance, capitalism, and socialism. As in the earlier Lyceum movement, this continual expression of thoughts honed what we now call "critical thinking skills." At 21, Phelps remarked that she enjoyed teaching, lecturing, and writing, but had not yet "decided to make it a life work."[7] Twenty years later she reflected: "At least it can be said of me that I have done some good worth while for my fellows as I journeyed along life's pathway."[8]

Second Generation Suffragist

A constitutional amendment granting women the right to vote was first introduced in the year after Phelps' birth. Her suffrage beliefs grew from the "Declaration of Sentiments" in 1848, the first National Woman's Rights Convention in 1850, and Lucy Stone's speech on "The Right of Suffrage for Women" before the Massachusetts Senate Judiciary Committee in 1857. Those early efforts failed to change the state constitution because it was believed too few women wanted the vote.[9] Inspired by her foremothers, Phelps became the first woman to register to vote in her small town when she turned 21 in 1897. She explained, "There are points relative to our social and political situations—that are sadly in need of change—[b]ut I fear that these ends will not be gained until one half the people cease to govern the whole.... Ours will be a new country when character is the motive power of election regardless of the person's wealth and social standing... In this manner I would bring about equal suffrage—agitate, educate—have all prepared and fully equipped to assume their duty ere they attempt it." She added, in a tone similar to

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Abby Kelley Foster's some fifty years earlier: "we must constantly work, keep the subject ever before them, causing them to think, investigate, learn."[10] Practicing what she preached, Phelps roused 63 other Sutton women to register to vote in 1900, in order "to help oust a committee man who was up for reelection."[11]

At that time women could not vote in national elections, so Phelps joined forces with likeminded Worcester County women to seek full participation in American democracy. Like many other teachers and librarians, she was a member of the Worcester Equal Franchise Club. (She also served as honorary vice president of the Liberal Party, attended meetings of the Massachusetts Women's Bimetallic Club, and belonged to the American Press Writers Association—dedicated "to freedom in thought, speech, press, and mails.")[12] As a supporter of the Massachusetts suffrage referendum on November 2, 1915, Phelps joined an August 14th pilgrimage to Lucy Stone's birthplace to commemorate the long struggle for equality. She carried the Sutton banner in the Boston suffrage parade on October 16 and in the Worcester parade two weeks later, helping to mark the 65th anniversary of the 1850 convention.[13] The state referendum failed, however, prompting the National American Woman's Suffrage Association to focus instead on passing a federal amendment.

An Unmarried Woman

Espousing traditional views, the editor of *The Blade* remarked that Lucy Waters Phelps "ought to be Mrs. for some good man."[14] A bachelor cousin wrote, "Your letters stir up many ideas in me that others do not touch...the unthinking class cannot appreciate ideas of that kind." She replied to her cousin's concern that she was not courted by any young men: "[I] do not wish to be, have never tried, nor have I given them a chance to do so." When he said, "You are not like most girls I know because you go to Town meeting," she responded: "Single life is not natural but in preference to a double life...fast paced lie and playing roles."[15] Indeed, she remained single—caring for relatives at her family home, 650 Central Turnpike; providing community leadership; and in later years running Paine Haven on the Pike, a roadside ice cream stand, before her death in 1965.

Across the centuries, women from Worcester County have "rocked the cradle" of democracy. Lucy Waters Phelps' story reminds us that the hard struggle for women's rights was won by ordinary people, thus demonstrating, in her words, the need for later generations to recognize "the authority that rests with [each person] for broadening the loyal spirit to the limit of [one's] influence."[16]

See Phelps' suffrage memorabilia in the Worcester Historical Museum's "Tell Tale Treasures Exhibit," through October2. A "Get Out the Vote" rally on Sutton Town Common—at 12 noon on Sunday, October 3—will honor Phelps as part of Sutton's tricentennial celebration

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[1] J. Winfield, Scott, ed., *The Sovereign Citizen,* March 1922.
[2] Bud Gurney, *Waters Genealogy*, 111-112; *Senator Richard T. Moore, Press Release,* 9 September 2003 (www.senatormoore.com).
[3] LWP to Susan H. Wixon, ed., *The Free Thinker,* 11 July 1887.
[4] LWP to Harlan C. Williams of Fridley, MT, 23 March 1905.
[5] LWP to Emma Stockinger of Versailles, IN, 29 August 1897.
[6] LWP to Susan H. Wixon, ed. *The Free Thinker,* 7 November 1896.
[7] LWP to Emma Stockinger, 27 October 1897.
[8] LWP to Charles H. Phelps of Union City, PA, 20 August 1906.
[9] Joelle Million, *Woman's Voice, Woman's Place: Lucy Stone and the Birth of the Woman's Rights Movement* (Greenwood, 2003), p. 231.
[10] LWP to Emma Stockinger, 27 October 1897.
[11] Harlan C. Williams of Fridley, MT, to LWP, 12 July 1898.
[12] Francis B. Livesey, "The American Press Writers' Association, No. 3170." [n. d.]. *Lucy Waters Phelps Scrapbook.*
[13] Letter and invitation from Massachusetts Woman's Suffrage Association, 29 May 1915. Lucy Waters Phelps Archives.
[14] Charles C. Moore, Editorial, *The Kentucky Bluegrass Blade,* 1 May 1899.
[15] Charles H. Phelps to LWP, 18 February 1906 and 15 July 1906, and her replies, 13 June 1906 and 20 August 1906.
[16] Lucy Waters Phelps, "Character, Conduct, Culture," *The Sovereign Citizen,* March 1922.