Rediscovering a Biographical Subject: Moving from the Public to the Private Sphere in the Life of Progressive Educator Flora White, 1860-1948

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ON 19 JANUARY 1949, Margaret Malone typed a letter to Alice Whiteman of Greenfield, Massachusetts, executor of the will of progressive educator Flora White (1860-1948). Malone's purpose was to make a request regarding the papers of her deceased friend. Highlighting the importance of letters White wrote to her mother and sister while teaching in southern Africa in 1885-87, Malone suggested they be copied and placed—"perhaps a dozen or so in abridged form"—in the back of the White family genealogy in the local historical society at Heath, Massachusetts.[1] She further recommended sending the originals to White's only surviving sibling, "her dear old brother Joe [Joseph]," who at ninety-two was "in good health and memory" and living with his daughter on a ranch in Oklahoma.[2] Malone's request was awkward, since the letters had already

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been sent to John Haynes Holmes, editor of White's articles published in *Unity* magazine. Holmes was also the minister of the Community Church on Park Avenue in New York, as well as a founder of both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Malone pressed the executor to prevail upon "our good friend" Holmes to return them "so that they can go to her own people who loved her dearly."[3]

Joseph White died ten days later. While there is no record of Whiteman's response to Malone, the letters from southern Africa were shipped to Oklahoma and held by his daughter—my grandmother—until her death in 1964. For the next four decades, they remained in Oklahoma in the custody of my grandmother's eldest son, and then his widow. In 2005, they came unexpectedly to me, Joseph White's great-granddaughter. Previously unaware of this correspondence, I had already written and published biographical essays on Flora White (whom I never met), utilizing public documents such as her speeches and articles, school circulars and catalogues, advertisements, newspaper interviews, local and institutional histories, and census data. The letters presented an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of my biographical subject.

My use of White's private correspondence would likely have surprised Margaret Malone, a well-informed woman and widow of the Attorney General of Massachusetts. In 1949, she would scarcely have imagined that her friend's correspondence would be of interest to scholars studying the role of women in the early progressive education movement in the United States. The dilemma Malone faced regarding the disposition of her friend's papers reflected a larger tension in White, who—as a woman—continually negotiated the opportunities and limitations she experienced in combining a public and private life. Although family finances and gender restrictions prevented White from earning a college degree, she became an accomplished educator whose lectures in Boston alternated every other week with those of Harvard professor William James. On the other hand, she was sometimes drawn into traditional views of women. For

example, she travelled to southern Africa to assist an older sister who had suffered a "breakdown."White's sister Hattie's situation was described in language that reflected the Cult of Invalidism among nineteenth century middle class white women; she was referred to as "dyspeptic," and her poor health attributed to overexertion.[4] White, for her part, had a successful career promoting female "physique."[5] She taught physical culture (physical education) at Westfield Normal School [6] at the request of the Secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education, and trained at the Normal School of Gymnastics in Boston under Baron Nils Posse, becoming his associate principal in 1895. White presented a paper at the 1896 meeting of the National Education Association (NEA), in which she advocated the development of fine and gross motor skills in children. The other conference speakers were "all male, and almost all administrators."[7] According to historian Kate Rousmaniere, female teachers were permitted to attend the meeting, "but they were prohibited from speaking. Their function was primarily to listen and learn from their superiors."[8] In 1897, White founded a private school in Concord, Massachusetts, where she used progressive teaching methods to develop the intellectual and physical capacities of girls. White received the endorsement of prominent educators, clergy, and academics she knew personally and professionally. Among the group was G. Stanley Hall, president of Clark University and the first president of the American Psychological Association. Hall is remembered for opposing higher education for women, yet he endorsed White's school "for its general methods and scope, and for the devoted personal attention each pupil is sure to receive."[9]

Margaret Malone's action to ensure private, family custody of White's letters was in keeping with a widely-held belief that women's lives were lived largely in the private sphere. Several scholars have explored this phenomenon in life writing. For example, Linda Wagner-Martin observed that, while men's lives have often been written as personal success stories that unfold in public arenas, fewer women have had the kind of success that attracts public notice. Their biographies must therefore be constructed at the juncture of

public and private experiences, and not depicted as a linear progression of the external self.[10] Linda McDowell proposed a binary construct to demonstrate how women have been relegated to particular places in Western thought—that is, private, indoor, and at home.[11] Lois Rudnick wrote that biography is a Western and male-dominated genre. She added that women's lives seldom, if ever, conform to the "normative biographical hero type.[12]

This article explores insights gained in Flora White's life story when the discovery of new primary sources allowed the biographer to move from the public to the private sphere. Given widely-held assumptions of her day, the move seems counterintuitive. However, White was a public figure with a career path, unlike most women of her era; as such, the private details of her life were those that were *least readily available* to the biographer. Once discovered, they proved important in finding what Joyce Antler calls the "real self" behind the public mask—the discovery of which is the goal of the biographer, regardless of the subject's gender.[13]

The receipt of Flora White's private correspondence caused me to re-examine my earlier portrayal of her as a confident woman who was proud of her family heritage, eschewed conventional gender roles, and pursued her career in a linear fashion despite the marginalizing factors she faced. On one hand, all of these characterizations are true. White was instrumental in founding a historical society in the town of her birth, and was diligent in writing about her ancestry. Contemporaries described White as having penetrating eyes and a determined stride; they recalled that she did a daily handstand until she was nearly seventy years old. White had the confidence to bemoan the standardization of public education, announcing to the NEA in 1896, "It has long been a fancy of mine that nature covers her face and weeps whenever she beholds a schoolhouse."[14] Her letters, however, allowed me to recognize that ambivalence and insecurity were a part of White's life story. This essay is an amplification of that assertion and presents insights gained from her private correspondence in two important areas: social class and gender.

"Life Facts of Flora White"

Flora Jane White was born in 1860 in a farm home in the small Berkshire hill town of Heath, Massachusetts, the youngest of five siblings who were living at her birth.[15] Her father, also named Joseph White, farmed his family's ancestral homestead, pursued a keen interest in higher mathematics, and represented his district in the Massachusetts legislature. He died during Flora's infancy. Flora's mother, Harriet Mayhew White, was a well-educated woman for her day, having studied Latin with the local minister to prepare for the Troy Female Seminary founded by women's rights advocate Emma Willard. Flora's older siblings, in order of age, included Emma, Harriet ("Hattie"), Charles, Joseph, and Mary ("May"). Charles died when he was a small child, before Flora's birth.

Much of White's early life story can be gleaned from census records, genealogies, and local histories of Heath, Massachusetts. One particularly rich resource, however, is an unpublished manuscript penned by White, titled "Life Facts of Flora White and Family Recorded Mar. 18, 1939."[16] It provides details of her life narrative, and was first catalogued in the Heath Historical Society under her name in 2011. Two factors contributed to White's decision to write the manuscript. The first was the death one year earlier of Mary White, Flora's housemate and confidante and the last of her sisters. (The loss also prompted Flora to publish *Poems by Mary A. White and Flora White* in 1939, as a memorial to her sibling.)[17] A second factor was that White had passed the age of seventy—an occasion that, in her mind, gave her new freedom to disclose details of her life as she wished. White observed in a 1941 interview, "When one is 70, one may laugh at all the rules and do precisely as one pleases."[18] In writing "Life Facts," White wanted to leave a record of events that she alone remembered. While she might not have anticipated developments in women's history and biography that would draw scholars to her life narrative over sixty years later, she clearly believed *someone* would find her personal story—or her family's—interesting or useful.

Some of the most painful parts of White's childhood are spelled out in the recorded recollections of her brother Joseph, rather than in "Life Facts." Following the death of Flora's father in 1861, his wife Harriet moved with her children to nearby Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts. They existed on meagre funds, and Mrs. White "was practically an invalid for several years."[19] The Whites returned to Heath, but the family unit fragmented further in 1864 when Joseph was "bound out" to another farm family on his eighth birthday.[20] Binding children was widespread practice in the United States during the nineteenth century, and often involved those who were illegitimate or orphaned, or whose families were unable to care for them. Under the binding agreement, the master gave the child food, clothing, schooling, and preparation for a trade. Families of bound children usually received payment for their son's or daughter's labour. Young Joseph's binding relationship was terminated after one year because he was not sent to school as agreed. He was then "bound out" to a second farmer who sent him to a common school, but kept him in "most unfortunate" circumstances.[21] He remained in this arrangement until he was twenty-one years of age. The White family's displacement and loss of livelihood, and the disadvantages endured by the only son, would remain in Flora's thinking for the rest of her life.

Flora White received most of her early schooling from her mother, including instruction in "Latin, Literature and Mathematics with thorough training in English Composition."[22] Then, in 1872, Harriet White moved with daughters Mary and Flora to Amherst, Massachusetts, where Flora attended public schools for two years, and had a year of private instruction "with reading of World History & Literature."[23] They lived in the home of Isaac Esty, a widower and retired Congregational minister whose son was a mathematics professor at Amherst College. Esty had been a friend of the White family since his days of serving as a supply minister at Heath. Late in life, Flora White wrote of the minister, "His ample library and his stimulating companionship were our constant joy. We called him grandpa & loved him as our very own."[24] White also wrote that during her

girlhood another former Heath resident, her godmother Laura Emerson, "had a beautiful home in Amherst that was always open to us."[25] Laura Emerson was distantly related to the White family and to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The making of a progressive educator

Reverend Esty died in 1875, and left money for Flora and Mary White to enroll in a two-year teacher training program at Westfield Normal School, a coeducational institution in western Massachusetts largely serving women of modest means. White wrote that prior to beginning their study at Westfield, she and Mary decided to "try our hand at teaching" in the rural town of Hawley, Massachusetts, near Heath.[26] The sisters graduated from Westfield in 1877, and taught in the public schools of West Springfield and Springfield, Massachusetts. They lived with their mother and moved frequently, residing in the Massachusetts towns of West Springfield, Chicopee, and Springfield.

The area where the White women lived was industrializing and growing rapidly as immigrants and rural people moved to Springfield to seek employment. Flora witnessed a national trend as village schools gave way to urban systems and public schools operated under a "mass education" model.[27] David B. Tyack wrote that American teachers of this period—faced with the challenge of keeping order in schools with "many different social classes"—utilized a variety of techniques including busywork, competition, and fear of ridicule.[28] Students sat in straight rows, and discipline prevailed. After a few years of teaching in public schools, White altered her career course, in large part due to shortcomings she perceived in the institutions where she had taught.[29]

In 1885, White began teaching English history and literature at a preparatory school for the sons of Dutch, English, and Huguenot settlers at the Paarl (Dutch for "pearl"), in the Cape Colony in southern Africa. Her journey occurred after her sister Hattie, a teacher at the Huguenot Seminary in nearby Wellington, suffered a "break-

down."[30] Although she had attended Westfield Normal School, Hattie was one of the teaching missionaries sent throughout the globe by Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in Massachusetts.[31] Flora White went to the Cape Colony to lend support to her sibling and, upon returning home in 1887, founded with her sister Mary a small private school in Springfield to experiment with fine and gross motor activities as a means of education. In 1892—due to an "acute" need for teachers to learn new instructional methods—White joined the faculty of Westfield Normal School, where she opened a department of motor-training and taught physical culture in the teacher training program.[32] At Westfield, White also introduced woodcrafts into the teacher training curriculum, a development enhanced by her study of active education at the Seminarium for Teachers in Naas, Sweden, during the summer of 1891.

The Seminarium was an international gathering place for teachers with an interest in active learning. Its director followed the ideas of early education pioneers, the German pedagogical theorist Friedrich Froebel and his Swiss counterpart Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. At the Seminarium, the production of traditional Swedish handcrafts (*slojd*, pronounced "sloyd") was used to teach theoretical academic subjects and develop physical skills according to the needs and interests of each child. Although White was one of only twenty-seven American teachers who received instruction at the Seminarium by 1893,[33] approximately four thousand Swedish teachers, and fifteen hundred teachers from other countries, studied there between 1880 and 1907.[34]

During White's employment at Westfield, the noted progressive educator Francis Parker invited her to head a department at the Cook County Normal School in Illinois. White declined because her position at Westfield was "so recent."[35] However, in 1895 she moved to Boston to become associate principal at Baron Nils Posse's Normal School of Gymnastics, where she had studied during the summer of 1893. Posse is credited with introducing Swedish gymnastics into the United States, but White's appointment at his school was short-lived.[36] He died shortly after her arrival; she, in turn, was hospital-

ized with appendicitis, and then confined to a lengthy period of bed rest.[37] When White recovered, she moved to Concord, Massachusetts, to found a new school that she would regard as the pinnacle of her career.

Miss White's Home School

Miss White's Home School for Children was designed for girls but also accepted boys, especially if their siblings were enrolled there. A maximum of twenty pupils, day students and boarding, attended the school each year. Its ambiance was homelike, a characteristic that supports McDowell's binary construct; however, the school also placed a strong emphasis on "Regime, physique, and bodily alertness"[38] during a time when scientific and medical authorities wrote that women were physically and intellectually limited and should be restricted in their mental activity and movement.[39] Academic studies at Miss White's Home School included English, three foreign languages (Latin, German, and French), mathematics and science, "in every case as adapted to the pupil to meet the demands of her highest development."[40] The school had an optional summer program at Heath, where girls studied astronomy, local birds and wildflowers, gardening, handcrafts, household arts, and classic literature. Like the Concord school, White's summer program focused on gymnastics—with ropes, a climbing ladder, and other apparatus being available for indoor work. The girls also played basketball and hiked the Berkshire Hills.[41] The summer program was located on a property the sisters purchased after trying unsuccessfully to buy the old White homestead. They called their new acquisition Plover Hill.

Flora established Miss White's Home School when Mary was associate principal of the Sloyd Training School in Boston. Mary joined Flora a few years later; the sisters continued the school until 1914 when they sold it at Mary's request, due to her poor health. Late in life, Flora recalled that the school had existed on the strength of its theories, and not on college admissions standards; she added that her students had no difficulty succeeding in college.[42]

The sisters had planned to travel in Europe after selling their school, but the First World War prevented it. They returned to Plover Hill, and taught a few boarding students, while Flora tutored and pursued a variety of interests. She involved the entire community in an outdoor religious drama, composed music and poetry, and published articles in *Unity* magazine. The White sisters also became—along with their friend Margaret Malone—members of an "unusual… colony" of intellectuals who gathered at Heath each summer.[43] They included Angus Dun, Dean of the Episcopal Theology School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and then bishop of Washington, DC; Felix Frankfurter, US Supreme Court Justice; the noted theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who first delivered his famous Serenity Prayer at the Heath Union Church; and Ethel Moors, a progressive Bostonian who championed the innocence of anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti executed for murder, and whose banker husband served on the Harvard Corporation. One Heath resident wrote of the group:

> Some were conventional in manner; but foibles, idiosyncrasies, even eccentricities, were not so much tolerated as respected and appreciated—as personality traits, as an aspect of vacation-therapy. This is important because such ostentation as there was (other than Dr.-ing those who qualified) was looked upon as …[a] form of idiosyncrasy and there was little competition….
>
> They developed warm and lasting friendships, with one another and with the natives. They lived at a time when writing and receiving letters were among the pleasures of life, and during the off season they corresponded, always sharing news about Heath.[44]

White's correspondence

Flora White's pleasure in writing and receiving letters proved to be critical to my discovery of her "true self." I learned that, in addition to the correspondence from the Cape Colony, my grandmother had received a collection of letters Flora wrote to her mother and sister

Mary during the summer of 1891 when she travelled from New York to Sweden and studied at the Seminarium for Teachers. Over time—as Joseph White's grandchildren became senior citizens, sold their homes, and moved into smaller quarters—I became the grateful recipient of White's letters and papers that my relatives had stored in Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Nebraska. The papers included correspondence my grandmother and great-grandfather received from Flora over many years, as well as collections of letters she received from John Haynes Holmes, Angus Dun, and New England landscape painter Robert Strong Woodward, a distant White relative. My aunt, Joseph White's eldest granddaughter, provided written recollections along with correspondence she received from Flora White during the final ten years of her life. The receipt of new primary sources caused me to adjust and deepen my previous understanding of my biographical subject.

Prior to discovering the letters, I had made use of White's public documents to construct a timeline of her life. This structure was a useful backdrop for analyzing the correspondence and juxtaposing it against White's public writings and statements. After receiving White's private papers, I carefully read each letter, typed material when appropriate, researched and identified unfamiliar names, noted passages of significance, and looked for themes in the writing. I also noted instances of congruence and disparity in her public and private documents. My examination revealed there was much more detail on the subjects of class and gender in White's private papers than I had heretofore seen in her pubic writings. This understanding enabled me to answer some of my previous questions about White, and to see her as a fuller human being.

Public Presentations of Class and Gender

Although Miss White's Home School clearly served a privileged clientele, White's public speeches and writings were focused directly on educational, rather than class, concerns. Nevertheless, she ran advertisements for the school in *The Atlantic Monthly,* required references,

charged tuition (the equivalent today of $2,640 for day students and $15,800 for boarding pupils), and accepted applicants "provided they are unquestionably desirable as companions and pupils."[45] In my early biographical essays I touched on the issue of class by acknowledging the privileged background of Flora White's students. I also discussed the death of White's father during her infancy, linked it to her brother's separation from the family, and noted that the Whites lived on limited means. My primary interest in these early pieces, however, was to situate White's life story against a backdrop of "the struggle for the American curriculum," as Herbert Kliebard described it.[46] I sought to place Flora White in the great debates that swirled around the growth of progressive education, while at the same time noting her marginalization as a woman.[47] My early examination of public writings revealed that White had known poverty as well as relative affluence during her life. For example, one Heath resident wrote in an essay commemorating the town's bicentennial that "the Whites [Flora and Mary] were famous for their afternoon tea parties which were attended by the numerous members of the clergy and other summer visitors."[48] Another Heath resident described the White family's economic circumstances in a town guidebook: "Their father died at 51 (in 1860), six months after Flora was born; Mary was 2 years older; there were 3 other children older than they; and after his death, at least, the family was very poor. In their old age Mary and Flora were poor again."[49] These passages raised questions in my mind about how Flora White had negotiated issues of social class in a manner that allowed her to establish a private school to which the "old New England families" sent children to be educated in the "approved fashion," according to the *Boston Sunday Globe*.[50]

On one hand, Flora White's family had been what Margaret Malone would describe as "by far the most outstanding family" she knew among the people of Heath.[51] The Whites were descended from Puritans who emigrated to Salem, Massachusetts, in the 1630s. They had moved steadily westward, settling in the Heath area in 1752. Flora's great-grandfather, Colonel Asaph White, had been "connected with almost every enterprise of a public nature in [the] re-

gion."[52] However, by 1830—long before Flora's birth—Heath and the region around it had entered a period of decline as the soil wore out, new inventions allowed for large-scale farming, and the population shifted to the Midwest. Those factors—plus the father's death and the brother's separation—made me realize there was a larger story.

The treatment of gender in White's public papers was more direct than her treatment of social class. Since Miss White's Home School was explicitly organized for girls with "special attention" given to "the development of physique," I portrayed White in my early writings as a pioneer in the education of girls and women.[53] I also noted that many educational doors were closed to women of her era. For example, White never received a baccalaureate degree, a situation explained by the fact that, until Boston University opened its doors in 1873, no colleges or universities in New England admitted women. Such limitations, along with prevailing gender stereotypes, contributed to women being marginalized in the progressive education movement that viewed men as theorists and women as practitioners.

As I conducted my early research, several questions arose that were gender-related and unanswered by the public documents. For example, I noticed that the sole male child in the White household was "bound out," while the girls remained with their mother. (According to family lore, this occurred so that young Joseph could grow up with a male role model.) I wondered how this early separation affected White's relationship with her brother. Other questions also arose. How did Flora White perceive her role as a woman? Did she have a romantic partner? What were the circumstances that resulted in her remaining unmarried? In time, many answers would be provided by the discovery of Flora White's private correspondence and papers.

Viewing Class from a Private Perspective

Flora White's letters reveal that her family's loss of income and status affected her self perception, even as a small child. During her stay in southern Africa she recalled an earlier comment made by one of her sisters:

> I've tried to raise my family to my own level" as a certain sister of mine remarked years & years ago when I was a little thing and "took in" what I heard. The aforementioned sister I am afraid is in the uncomfortable position of finding the family a little above *her level*. At any rate if there is further *lifting* to be done I think she is the one in most need of the hoisting.[54]

White was likely referring to her eldest sister, Emma, the only one of the White sisters who married. Emma and her husband, William Hillman of Hawley, Massachusetts, had ten children. They had limited contact with Flora White during her adult years because they moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, where William Hillman worked as a billing agent with the Rock Island Freight depot.[55] Despite the lingering resentment in the letter, relations between the two sisters were sufficiently strong that in 1881 Emma and William Hillman named one of their daughters after Flora White. Around 1900, Flora Hillman died of tuberculosis, as did her younger sister. The Hillman family then moved to Tacoma, Washington, for "health reasons," and remained there for the rest of Emma and William Hillman's lives.[56]

Flora White's correspondence shows that the social exposure she received in Amherst was helpful in making contacts among upper-middle-class people in the Cape Colony. In a letter to her mother, White reported visiting the Ferguson family at the Huguenot Seminary in Wellington. Flora had had previous contact with Abbie Ferguson, who accompanied her on the journey to southern Africa. An American citizen and Mount Holyoke graduate, Ferguson had—at the request of the moderator of the Dutch Reformed church—taken the Mount Holyoke curriculum to the Huguenot Seminary to prepare white girls in the Cape Colony to be teachers and missionaries. Flora

White gave the following report on the time she spent with Ferguson's niece, Maggie:

> Maggie F's mother is such a good, kind souled woman—she knows lots of people that we do—Amherst people & the Foster girls—Mrs. Hopkins & Mrs. Kelsy. Sat. was Mr. Ferguson's birthday—It seemed so natural and home-like and American there. Maggie and I lay a bed late Sat. morn—we were awaked by a servant bringing in an elegant cup of chocolate for each of us.[57]

White's letters also show her awareness of firm social restrictions in the Cape Colony, which she depicted in class, rather than racial, terms. For example, she commented that "it seems no one but the lower classes are expected to ever sit on any public sitting place. However we *stood* and had such a lovely sea view."[58]

Beyond her Amherst social contacts, White's letters suggest that she also cultivated a refined social milieu while living in Springfield, Massachusetts. During that period, White was a practising Episcopalian and was strongly influenced by the sermons of the Reverend John Cotton Brooks, Rector of Christ Church. (Brooks' wife even wrote to Flora during her stay in the Cape Colony.) There is no record of what White wrote to Mrs. Brooks; however, Flora's letters home show the influence of class in a comparison she draws between Brooks and the British Particular Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. The most popular preacher in London, Spurgeon never attended theology school. When White heard him preach at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London in 1885 while en route to southern Africa, she bemoaned his "vulgarisms," in marked contrast to her admiration of "dear Mr. Brooks."[59] White added that Brooks "speaks to humanity at its highest," as opposed to Spurgeon, who "speaks to humanity at its lowest."[60]

For most of her stay in the Cape Colony, White lived at the rural home of her principal Mr. le Roux, his wife, and children. Although the family had four servants and a cook, White described Mrs. le Roux as a "homespun little woman" who lived "plainly but well."[61] This description contrasts with White's own interest in fash-

ion, displayed in letters featuring sketches of attractive clothing she made and proudly wore. This private information offered a different perspective of White than I had seen in public materials; however, her behaviour affirms Susan Bassnett's[62] and Casey Blanton's[63] findings that travelling women who wanted to be independent of gender norms asserted their femininity through concerns over proper dress. During her stop in London, White enjoyed purchasing a few luxury items for her mother, sister, and herself. The purchases were balanced with careful budgeting, as White regularly sent a portion of the salary to her mother and Mary. The letters also document that she received transportation to the Cape Colony as part of her employment agreement.[64]

By the time Flora White opened Miss White's Home School in Concord, she had established professional and social contacts with esteemed educators, clergy, lawyers, academics, and physicians, who lent their endorsement to her school. The status she achieved through the Concord school inevitably drew comments from her brother Joseph, who, in 1881, had joined the Hillmans in Nebraska, where he eventually operated a grain elevator and served as county commissioner and local postmaster.[65] After Joseph White married and established a family, his sisters persuaded him to send his only daughter, Catherine, my grandmother, to study at Miss White's Home School for a year. Joseph White amused his Midwestern relatives after visiting the school by commenting on the finger bowls his sisters and their dining companions used during the evening meal. Noting that the women were supposed to dress for dinner, he observed their low-cut necklines and commented, "it appeared to me they undress."[66]

Joseph White moved to northwestern Oklahoma in 1908. He and Flora enjoyed a warm relationship through correspondence and her visits out West. In one undated letter, written from Bucksteep Manor in Becket, Massachusetts, she wrote to her brother:

> Don't let the above name [Bucksteep Manor] (predicated by a purely English owner) prejudice you as being snobbish. It does look as I admit [sic] but it was given to the church for diocesan use when the owners were no longer able to come

> here for a part of each year as had been their habit before the war.[67]

Due to her apparent affection for her only brother, Flora White expressed deep regret that his lot in life had not been easy. White's letter to Joseph's daughter Catherine in 1936 seemed to recall his early separation from the family, loss of a leg through an accidental gunshot wound, death of his son at age eleven, and the fact that he was, at that time, losing his wife to a terminal illness:

> My heart aches so for your dear father. I think of him day and night and what lies before him. He is so sweet and so plucky—so self-eliminating—I can't bear to have him hurt. Life has always hurt him too much anyhow. I am sending you my letter to your father and mother which can go with whatever you get in the way of a token from me. [White enclosed a cheque.][68]

Over time, Flora White repeatedly tried to persuade her brother's progeny to return to the East. Her actions reflected a longing for the companionship of family members and a desire to elevate their status through growth opportunities. For example, in 1925 White arranged for Catherine White's husband, Golden Moyer, to become the schoolmaster at Heath. Flora and Mary White moved into an upstairs apartment in their house at Heath so the Moyers and their five children could have the living space below. White had "great plans" for the children's future in Massachusetts; however, when spring arrived, Golden Moyer was anxious to get back to the Oklahoma plains, and the family returned home.[69] When the Moyers were especially hard hit during the Dust Bowl during the 1930s, Flora White sent them clothing and offered suggestions on how the children could receive a college education. In 1935 she wrote to her niece Catherine, "Do follow closely what Mr. Roosevelt is planning for the increased education of the youth. It may give an opportunity for Golden Jr. to go on with his college work. I do hate to have him deprived of it."[70] When the young man graduated from Oklahoma State University, began an engineering job in Kansas City, and be-

came engaged to be married, White presented the couple with a complete set of fine china, and informed the bride-to-be that she would need it for entertaining.[71]

Even though Flora White was gregarious and had a large circle of friends throughout her life, she was lonely for family after her sister Mary died. White repeatedly tried to persuade her brother's eldest granddaughter, Grace Moyer, to permanently move to the East:

> What would you think of Columbia University for your PhD[?] You might get a Scholarship or Fellowship there. They have a lot of them. And maybe we could live together out there on Morningside Heights where we used to visit the Robbins so much. I have friends out there too—the Vanderbilts and others—Think it over and maybe something will open up. Oh, by the way—don't use the phrase "get to see." The "get" is superfluous and is poor English. Avoid the use of get—got—gotten. They are seldom used properly. Your brief note was a joy to receive—in spite of the "get." Forgive me for mentioning it but your handwriting is so meticulous it really calls loudly for equally perfect English.[72]

Viewing Gender from a Private Perspective

Flora White's private correspondence reveals her struggle to live a full life during a period when women's roles were circumscribed. Her letters from the Cape Colony show that she did not always exude confidence. Rather, the spirited young woman recognized she lived in an environment that could seriously limit her ability to reach her potential, and she confessed to being "a little blue" on more than one occasion.[73]

As Hattie's health improved, White acknowledged in letters that her sister had previously been "dyspeptic."[74] Dyspepsia was widely thought to be a result of women's excessive engagement in physical or mental exertion. This characterization of Hattie—that she became ill because of excessive work—remained long after her death in 1904, and shows the degree to which Flora had to navigate around public expectations and private realities. Flora was the likely source

of information for a 1929 article in a local Massachusetts newspaper that extolled the historic roots of the White family, going back to 1333. The article noted that Hattie "was a woman of brilliant attainments and because she was so capable overestimated her strength and her health failed."[75] The description was repeated verbatim in Heath's sesquicentennial book in 1935. However, four years later—when Flora White, as the last living person in her immediate family, was writing "Life Facts" for a limited audience—she was more direct: Hattie "died of a cancer that for religious reasons she refused to have removed."[76]

Despite the reason for her trip to southern Africa, Flora White's letters show she embarked on her journey with enthusiasm and optimism. She wrote, "I do not have a single feeling of dread about anything and mean to enjoy everything and everybody."[77] She readily made friends on board the ship, and entertained the other passengers by involving them in dramatic presentations. When Abbie Ferguson became ill during their stop in London, White toured the city without her so as not to miss out on an opportunity. Just before her arrival in the Cape Colony, White wrote to her mother and sister, "The Capt. made me promise to *write* him if I got blue and wanted my address. He told me over and over again not to change or allow myself to *rust*."[78]

Once she reached her destination at the Paarl, White encountered some resistance to the idea of having a female teacher at a boys' school. She was gracious in trying to put this complaint in perspective:

> One time somebody not belonging to the Paarl said he did not think they should have a lady teacher in its boys school—which I do suppose offended the boys for one wrote a piece in the paper in which he remarked that someone had said that & stating that he would defy the Paarl to produce a more competent or capable teacher than Miss White which of course was too silly & boyish a thing to do for no one had spoken of me & the one who said it (about a lady teacher) knew nothing about me except that I was a fe-

> male. But I liked the boy's spirit in standing up for his teacher.[79]

Aside from homesickness, White's most difficult challenges in the Cape Colony were living with Mrs. le Roux—whom she regarded as selfish and unchristian in dealings with others—and coming to terms with the restricted lives of Boer women.[80] As White anticipated her return home from the Cape Colony, she wrote to her sister Mary:

> It will seem so sweet to have real companionship again after these two years of hermitage. I hope I have not grown crusty. I am firmly convinced though that prolonged stay would transform me outwardly and as far as all practical purposes are concerned entirely into a wide, stolid, prolific Dutch "Vrau." You will have to pinch me to keep me in trim. I never think to smile now. I incline my head slowly and very slightly to show recognition, and impassively shake hands on all possible occasions. However I am not seriously alarmed but when the presence is removed I shall rebound fast enough. I find that I am of a very cock-like and rubbery temperament. I can sustain a good pressure without being ultimately affected by it.[81]

Four years after returning to Massachusetts, White sold a short story to *Harper's Magazine*. It was based in southern Africa and published under a male pen name.[82] White used the earnings to fund her next travel experience in Sweden.

At the Seminarium, White also encountered attitudes that limited women's lives. This time she was more assertive in labeling gender bias than in her Cape Colony correspondence. White bristled at one of her colleagues who believed that woodwork was inappropriate for women:

> There is a big, fat jolly German here who thinks we are all very unwomanly to be doing this work. He writes much against slojd of this kind for woman in the "Zeitung" at home. Of course we are all against him in spite of his jolly

> face and charming ways which he is always entertaining us with.[83]

White also commented on the practice of separating women and men at dinner, noting, "There are about 3 times as many gentlemen as ladies here—We do everything together except eating. I think it a very funny plan to separate us then."[84]

White's correspondence to her sister Mary also provide details on her romance with a man she met at the Seminarium who was only identified by the common Swedish first name of Nils. White wrote:

> He is such a splendid fellow May. I just long to have you know & love him. His chief virtue is loving me which he does thoroughly and satisfactorily but he has plenty of others. He has the kind of face that makes everyone say at once what a fine fellow that must be & let me tell you that everything was practically settled between us before we had ever spoken to one another at all. That sounds dreadfully romantic and scandalous but it is quite true.[85]

Another letter recounted:

> I have been out with Nils the whole afternoon. We walked through the parks—peeked into his room—took dinner outdoors to the accompaniment of an excellent band…. We are having such a nice time together—you cannot think—We are going to a concert together this evening…. Nils and I have talked so much about you today darling & you gave him your love and he returned it with interest…. He is so good so good—you cannot think how good.[86]

White's letters expressed her sadness when Nils was away, her plans to return to Massachusetts, and his intention to go to the United States. They also described factors that would make it difficult for him to relocate: his father's lack of support, Nils' position as the oldest of nine children, and the poor prospects for a Swedish teacher in the United States. At the end of the summer, when White was preparing to return to Massachusetts, her letters gave no indication that she wanted to remain in Sweden. One week before her de-

parture for the United States she wrote to her sister, "It seems such a little time now before I go home—Ah!! But I have had such a beautiful summer & I would not have it out of my life for a great deal."[87] White told her sister Mary that she and Nils were continuing to write every few days, adding, "I have so much to talk to you about."[88]

Since, at summer's end, Flora and Mary White were living together, their correspondence stopped. There is no record of the conversation that occurred between the sisters. It is unclear whether Nils came to the United States or if White ever saw him again. The only clue to White's romance is a poem titled "Amour" that she published in 1939:

> Red, Blood-red, streaming upward—
> Flaming, flaming, flaming fire—
> Detonation of a life-begetting flame.
> Fading, fading, fading—
> Golden streamers training—
> Darkness, deepening, deepening:
> Then a moment's afterglow—
> C'est Amour.[89]

White's later correspondence suggests that she had few regrets about foregoing marriage and children in order to found a school to prepare young women "for higher education and for life."[90] When White was seventy-nine, she urged her great-niece Grace Moyer—then a teacher in Oklahoma—to challenge traditional gender roles and envision accomplishments beyond what she herself had achieved:

> You know, Mrs. Dwight Morrow is taking President Neilson's place at Smith this year as he is retiring. She is a grand person and will I am sure make good while she is there. Maybe you are booked to become a college president Grace—who knows—And why not! You made a grand impression on everybody here.[91]

Epilogue and conclusion

When Flora White presented a paper to the NEA in 1896, she asked, "Now what is it we want for our youth?" and answered her own question: "More life and fuller!"[92] White's correspondence indicates that she also sought "More life and fuller" for herself and her loved ones. Met with the obstacles of gender and class limitations, White tried to avoid "repressing encroachments"[93] so her "cock-like and rubbery temperament" could emerge.[94] Through family background, successful networking, tenacity, hard work, and some luck, she was able to overcome the meagre circumstances of her childhood and achieve, for a period of time, upper-middle-class status. The path was accompanied by insecurity about what the future might hold, as well as ambivalence—for example, about how her brother's opportunities in life compared to her own. After achieving her desired status, White sought to bring her brother's family along with her, and—in the case of her great-niece—to encourage her to overcome the sort of gender obstacles that White encountered in her time. These important facets of White's life were not apparent in public documents, and only became clear with the discovery of her private correspondence and papers.

In old age, Flora White again faced financial insecurity. Mary's health deteriorated, requiring her to spend the last few years of her life in a nursing home. Flora's tutoring at Heath became "only occasional."[95] The White sisters kept their upstairs apartment at Heath for a time, but eventually Flora had to give it up. She resided at the Wayside Inn in Buckland, Massachusetts, or in Oklahoma City during the winter. Grace Moyer recalled that there were four train trips that White made from Massachusetts to Oklahoma in the 1940s to visit her brother Joseph. Moyer explained, "I am quite certain that it was Dean Howard Robbins who, through Bishop Cassady [sic], financially arranged for Aunt Flora and Grandfather to be in Oklahoma those four winters."[96]

Margaret Malone recalled of her friend, Flora White:

> She was probably one of the most loyal souls who ever lived, and Heath seemed very different after she left. We all felt so sad to have her lose her dear sister Miss May and

> then gradually her strength & health and then to have her give up the little apartment in Heath when the work became too much for her—because it was always a pleasure to see her & to talk with her particularly in her younger days—when her mind was so eager and alert.[97]

White's correspondence—as well as "Life Facts"—reveal that her friends repaid her loyalty with what assistance they could offer. Moors, Robbins, and Dun all shared their financial resources with her. Dun even prepared White's state and federal tax returns.

Flora White died on 14 February 1948, at age eighty-seven, after fracturing her hip in a fall at Parks Convalescent Home in Greenfield, Massachusetts. Two documents marking her death underscore the importance of gender and class in White's life. The first is an obituary that appeared in the Greenfield *Gazette and Courier* reporting that White "received praise from men of note throughout the educational world."[98] The second is a letter written by Margaret Malone to White's niece, Catherine Moyer. Malone observed that Flora and Mary White "were both unusual and represented the best that this country has produced in their generation and field of endeavor."[99] Malone also assured Catherine Moyer that the White family was "a very interesting, fine, old New England family, of which you have reason to be proud and thankful to be descended from."[100] Malone's comment would have made Flora White proud, too.

White's life offers perspective on a woman who was unusual in having both public and private personae during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The belated discovery of her personal letters and papers reveals how private documents can complicate, contradict—and ultimately enhance—a biographer's understanding of a public person. Margaret Malone eulogized Flora White by noting that "her educational ideas and…fine philosophy…. and her….courage made her a gallant soul."[101] As this essay demonstrates, it took both public and private sources to achieve a meaningful understanding of that characterization.

Notes

[1] Margaret Malone to Alice K. Whiteman, 19 January 1949. Heath, Massachusetts Historical Society.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Nineteenth century physicians warned that too much activity unnerved women, creating a host of maladies from hysteria to dyspepsia. Women were taught to conserve what little energy they had, since expending it in one area such as intellectual work removed it from another area such as childbearing. By 1850 a cult of ill health had developed that encouraged women to demonstrate their femininity by being invalids. Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White 6 March 1887, private collection; Carroll Smith Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and her Role in Nineteenth-Century America. *Journal of American* History 60, 2 (September 1973): 332-36; Stephanie L. Twin, "Women and Sport," in *Sport in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Donald Spivey (Westwood, CT: Greenwood, 1985), 193-217.

[5] Pocumtuk Valley Memorial Association Library, Deerfield, MA, *Miss White's Home School*, 1900, 2.

[6] A "normal school" is a school for the training of teachers.

[7] Kate Rousmaniere, *Citizen Teacher: The Life and Leadership of Margaret Haley* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 106.

[8] Ibid.

[9] *Miss White's Home School*, 1900, 7.

[10] Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 7.

[11] Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity & Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12.

[12] Lois Rudnick, "The Life of Mabel Dodge Luhan," in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives* of *Modern American Women*, ed. Sara Alperrn, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Israels Perry, and Ingrid Winther Scobie (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 118.

[13] Joyce Antler, "The Legacy of Lucy Sprague Mitchell," in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women*, ed. Sara Alpern et al. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 111.

[14] Flora White, "Physical Effects of Sloyd," paper read at the 1896 meeting of the National Education Association, Buffalo, NY, 1896, Flora White Papers, Private Collection in possession of the author [hereafter FWP].

[15] *Heath Gravestone Records* (Heath, MA: Heath Historical Society, 1991), 28.

[16] White, "Life Facts of Flora White and Family Recorded Mar. 18, 1939." Heath Historical Society.

[17] Flora White and Mary A. White, *Poems by Mary A. White and Flora White* (New York: Paebar, 1939).
[18] Miss Pickwick, "Girl About Town," *The Daily Oklahoman,* 9 February, 1941, C5.
[19] "J. D. White Life History," unpublished manuscript, FWP.
[20] Golden Moyer, Jr., "White, Joseph David," *Our Ellis County Heritage, 1885-1974,* vol. 1. (Gage, OK: Ellis County Historical Society, 1974), 493.
[21] "J. D. White Life History."
[22] White, "Life Facts," 2.
[23] Ibid., 3.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Harold Rugg and Ann Shumaker, *The Child-Centered School: An Appraisal of the New Education* (Yonkers-on-Hudson, NY: World Book Company, 1969), 15.
[28] David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 54-55.
[29] Flora White to Mary A. White, 6 March, 1887; White, Flora (1899), "Physical Effects of Sloyd," (March 1899) *Sloyd Bulletin,* 2: 5-10, FWP.
[30] Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White, 6 June, 1887, FWP.
[31] Amanda Porterfield, *Mary Lyon and the Mount Holyoke Missionaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[32] White, "Life Facts," 5.
[33] Otto Salomon, *The Theory of Educational Sloyd,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Silver Burdett, 1900), 147-148.
[34] Hans Thorbjornsson, "Otto Salomon (1849-1907)," *Prospects: The Quarterly Review of Comparative Education,* 23 (1994): 1-11.
[35] Ibid., 5.
[36] June A. Kennard, "The Posse Gymnasium," *JOPERD-The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 65 (1994): 50-52.
[37] White, "Life Facts," 5.
[38] *Miss White's Home School* 1900, 1.
[39] Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg, 332-356; Leslie A. Diehl, "The Paradox of G. Stanley Hall: Foe of Coeducation and Educator of Women," *American Psychologist* 41,8 (August 1986): 868-878.
[40] *Miss White's Home School* 1900, 2.
[41] *Plover Hill Camp for Girls* (Boston: Todd Printer, 1907), 1.
[42] Westfield State College, Westfield, MA, Flora White to Anne Halfpenny, 17 June 1940.
[43] Elisabeth Sifton, "The Serenity Prayer," *Yale Review* 86 (January 1998): 2-29; Edward Calver, *Heath, Massachusetts: A History and Guidebook* (Heath, MA:

Heath Historical Society, 1979), 196-205; Newland F. Smith, Jr. "Early Summer People in Heath," In *The Book of Heath: Bicentennial Essays,* ed. Susan B. Silvester (Ashfield, MA: Paidea, 1985), 140-157. See also Elisabeth Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (New York: Norton, 2003).

44 Calver, 200-202.

45 *Miss White's Home School* 1906, 6.

46 Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (London: Routledge, 1986).

47 Linda C. Morice, "The Progressive Legacy of Flora White," *Vitae Scholasticae* (Spring 2005): 57-74.

48 Newland J. Smith, 14 1.

49 Calver, 196. Calver's information is inaccurate. White's father died in 1861 at age 52 when Flora was 18 months old.

50 A. J. Philpott, "Mary O. Abbott's Sculptures on Exhibition in Concord," *Boston Sunday Globe,* 29 May 1938.

51 Heath Historical Society, Margaret Malone to Alice Whiteman, 19 January 1949.

52 Pearl Tanner, "Heath and Its Families," in *Sesquicentennial Anniversary of the Town of Heath, Massachusetts*, ed. Howard Chandler Robbins (Heath, MA: Heath Historical Society, 1935), 62.

53 *Miss White's Home School,* 1900, 2.

54 Flora White to Harriet M. White, undated, circa 1885-86, FWP.

55 *Descendants of John White, 1638-1900*, vol. 2. , 639. FWP.

56 Grace Moyer Share, "Notes on the Lives of Mary Abby and Flora White," 1; Grace Moyer Share's written notes on the Hellman family, FWP.

57 Flora White to Harriet M. White, 20 March 1887, FWP.

58 Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White, 4 October 1885, FWP.

59 Flora White to Harriet M. White, 2 August 1885, FWP.

60 Ibid.

61 Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White, 27 September 1885, FWP.

62 Susan Bassnett, "Travel Writing and Gender," in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 225-241.

63 Casey Blanton, *Travel Writing: The Self and the World* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

64 Flora White's undated letter written in August 1885 notes, "It seems the government has voted not to pay the teacher passage any more as I came just in time if I was coming at all. In future the school boards of each school will have to do it." FWP.

[65] Moyer, 493; "J.D. White Life History"; undated obituaries (Gage, OK and Pickrell, NE) of Joseph David White, FWP.
[66] Joseph David White, unpublished manuscript, FWP.
[67] Flora White to Joseph White, 7 August 1943, FWP.
[68] Flora White to Catherine White Moyer, 14 February 1936, FWP.
[69] Grace Moyer Share, "The Summer of 1938," FWP.
[70] Flora White to Catherine White Moyer, 4 July 1935, FWP.
[71] Author's conversation with Florence Moyer, 19 July 2005.
[72] Flora White to Grace Moyer, 2 May (circa 1939 or 1940), FWP. The letter refers to Heath summer friends Howard Chandler Robbins, Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, and his wife Louise Robbins. Also mentioned are Sally Vanderbilt and William D. Vanderbilt of New York, who, with their three sons, spent summers in Heath. Sally Vanderbilt was "the daughter of an old Greenfield [Massachusetts] family," according to Newland F. Smith, Jr., 148-150; 153.
[73] Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White, 4 October 1885; Flora White to Harriet M. White, 9 August 1886, FWP.
[74] Flora White to Harriet White, 6 June 1887, FWP.
[75] "Looking Back Over Centuries White Family First Mentioned in 1333," *The Franklin Press and Shelburne Falls News*, 2 May 1929: 1-3; *Heath Gravestone Records,* 28.
[76] White, "Life Facts," 10.
[77] Flora White to Harriet White, 6 June 1887, FWP.
[78] Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White 30 August 1885, FWP.
[79] Flora White to Harriet M. White, 9 August 1886, FWP.
[80] *Boer* is a Dutch word for "husbandman" or "farmer." English settlers in southern Africa used this term to describe fellow settlers of Dutch, German, or Huguenot descent. Today the term is "Afrikaner."
[81] Flora White to Mary A. White, 28 February 1887, FWP.
[82] George Heath, "Zan Zoo," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 83 (August 1891): 345-355.
[83] Flora White to Mary A. White, 13 June 1891, FWP.
[84] Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White 31 May 1891, FWP.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Flora White to Mary A. White, 16 August 1891, FWP.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Flora White to Mary A. White, 2 August 1891, FWP.
[89] Flora White, "Amour." In *Poems by Mary A. White and Flora White*, 27.
[90] *Miss White's Home School* 1906, 3.
[91] Flora White to Grace Moyer, 15 October 1939, FWP.
[92] White, "Physical Effects of Sloyd," 1896, 1.
[93] Ibid., 2.

[94] Flora White to Mary A. White, 28 February 1887, FWP.
[95] White, "Life Facts," 7.
[96] Grace Moyer Share, "The Summer of 1938," 13.
[97] Margaret Malone to Alice Whiteman, 15 February 1948. Heath (MA) Historical Society.
[98] "Writer, Educator Miss White Dies," Greenfield *Gazette and Courier,* 16 February 1948: 2.
[99] Margaret B. Malone to Catherine White Moyer, 14 October 1948. Heath (MA) Historical Society.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.

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