



AN ESSAY

# The Margaret Sanger Papers Illuminate the Historical Roots of the Birth Control Movement

*Professor Esther Katz, founder and director of the Margaret Sanger Papers, answered some questions about the digitization of the Margaret Sanger Papers in ProQuest History Vault, and the extraordinary value of this primary source material for researchers.*



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## How is studying Margaret Sanger's career relevant to us today? Why do you think it is important for students and researchers to have access to this content?

Margaret Sanger was one of the most controversial figures in her lifetime and continues to be so today. Contentious, often inaccurate, and usually politically motivated assessments of her work, both from the Right and the Left, have appeared in scholarly and popular literature, in newspaper columns and on the Internet. Recent film documentaries dramatizing Sanger's life attest to the growing interest in her role in American social history.

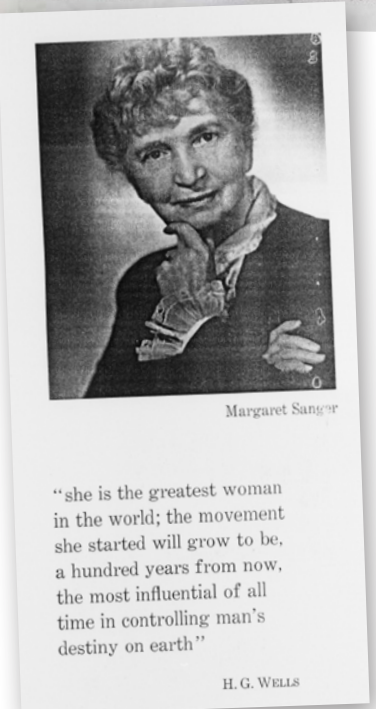
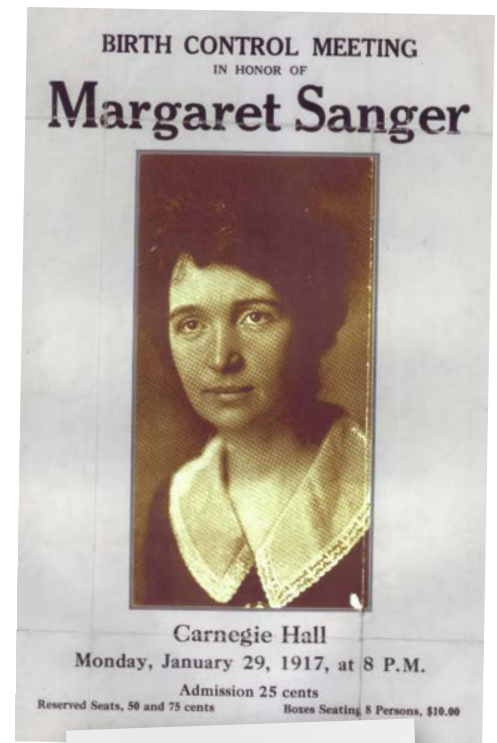
This interest in Sanger and the historical and social roots of the birth control movement has been intensified by recent debates over abortion rights, sex education, contraceptive provision by schools and new birth control methods, not to mention growing concerns over attempts to limit welfare births and global population control policies. Because Sanger herself instigated public discourse on many of these issues, for which she has been both vilified and praised, demand for access to her papers and for new interpretations of her life and work has dramatically increased.<sup>1</sup>

With mixed results, various biographies and monographs have given us divergent accounts of Sanger's life and her impact on American society. But the very fact that these studies offer such varied interpretations and incomplete portraits suggests the need for more detailed analyses of Sanger's private and public life and of the development and influence of the organized birth control movement.

Moreover, none of these highly interpretive studies contain much of Sanger's writing. Though Sanger is one of the most quoted – and often misquoted – women of the last century, many of her most significant letters and speeches have been neglected by the scholarly community, including her biographers. Sanger's own voice seldom resonates in any of these works. To date, most attempts to analyze Sanger's impact have been marred by underutilization of her extensive correspondence and correspondence and writings.

Outside of academia, Sanger's words have been appropriated by reproductive rights campaigners, anti-abortion advocates, the press, politicians, and even playwrights and filmmakers, to support or refute a claim or political offering. She is often inaccurately quoted, and rarely is the text given necessary context. Sanger's unpublished writings, particularly her letters and journals, offer us intimacy and comprehensiveness of character; they provide insight into the evolution of her ideas—precisely the qualities that are lacking in biographical and historical studies of Sanger.

This digitized edition of her papers is an invaluable resource for further study of the development of the birth control movement and its social, economic, and political impact over the last 100 years, as well as for understanding a wide range of legal, medical, political, and social issues, many of which continue to dominate our public discourse in the 21st century. It offers an opportunity to scrutinize Sanger's life and work, as well as the development of contraceptive option and the evolution of the birth control, population control and the reproductive rights movements.



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<sup>1</sup> Since we began keeping records in 1995, the Project has answered hundreds of mail and phone inquiries from a wide variety of individuals (45% students, 30% academics, 10% journalists, among others). The Project's web site, established in May 1997, attracts over 2 million hits per year, ranging from 100,000 in summer months to 353,000 during Women's History Month in March.



## Can you describe the content included in the Margaret Sanger Papers?

"I seem to have no life and no history apart from the birth control movement," Margaret Sanger (1879-1966) wrote in 1938. And, indeed, there was almost no phase of the birth control movement in which Margaret Sanger did not play a significant role.

Schooled in the pre-World War I activism of the radical labor left, and mobilized by her work as a home nurse and midwife in the immigrant ghettos of New York, Sanger became convinced that in liberating women from the tyranny of unwanted pregnancies, birth control would effect fundamental social change. From the publication of her 1914 radical monthly, *The Woman Rebel*, through her leadership of the International Planned Parenthood Federation in the 1950s, Margaret Sanger dedicated herself to making birth control legal, affordable, safe and respectable.

The success of Sanger's crusade for birth control has altered the historical patterns of relations between men and women, contributed to the phenomenal growth of women's participation in the labor force, and affected the very character of the family, not only in the United States but around the world.

These documents trace the intersection of Sanger's life and work with other reformers, activists and world leaders. In her letters and writings, Sanger takes us to textile strikes and tea with the Rockefellers, meetings with Gandhi and dinner parties with Helen Keller, a prison cell in the Queens County jail and the floor of the Japanese Diet. Some of these events are retold in her two autobiographies and some are covered in biographies of Sanger, but nowhere are the complexities and contradictions of Margaret Sanger's life so dramatically apparent as in her own papers.

Among the documents is the diary Sanger kept when she was imprisoned in the Queens County Penitentiary for opening the Brownsville Clinic, the nation's first birth control clinic; correspondence with notables including from Havelock Ellis, H. G. Wells, Pearl Buck, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Albert Einstein; Sanger's reaction to the nomination of John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, to the presidency; and the records of Sanger's travels to Japan (despite the opposition of the Japanese government and later, of General Douglas MacArthur; her participation in the strike of textile workers in Lawrence Mass.; and her 1936 meeting with Mahatma Gandhi.

# THE WOMAN REBEL

NO GODS NO MASTERS

VOL. I.

MARCH 1914

NO. 1.

## THE AIM

This paper will not be the champion of any "ism."

was with a sweetheart or through the desire for a sweetheart or something of the kind. It is themselves the nature

lows." His sole aim is to throw off responsibility. The same uncertainty in these emotions is experienced by girls in marriage in as great a proportion as in the unmarried. After the first experience the life of a girl varies. All these girls do not necessarily go into prostitution. They have had an experience which has not "ruined" them, but rather given them a larger vision of life, stronger feelings and a broader understanding of human nature. The adolescent girl does not understand herself. She is full of contradictions, whims, emotions. For her emotional nature longs for caresses, to touch, to kiss. She is often as well satisfied to hold hands or to go arm in arm with a girl as in the companionship of a boy.

It is these and kindred facts upon which the WOMAN REBEL will dwell from time to time and from which it is hoped the young girl will derive some knowledge of her nature, and conduct her life upon such knowledge.

It will also be the aim of the WOMAN REBEL to advocate the prevention of conception and to impart such knowledge in the columns of this paper.

Other subjects, including the slavery through motherhood; through things, the home, public opinion and so forth, will be dealt with.

It is also the aim of this paper to circulate among those women who work

## How did the Margaret Sanger Papers Project evolve?

In the first of a three-phase project, the Sanger Papers created *The Margaret Sanger Papers Microfilm Edition*, a two-series, 101-reel microfilm edition, published initially by University Publications of America and subsequently digitized and published by ProQuest:

1) *The Smith College Collections Series*, published as a microfilm in 1996, contains nearly 45,000 documents drawn from the Margaret Sanger Papers and nineteen other collections of manuscript material and archival records located in the Sophia Smith Collection and Smith College Archives at Smith College. It incorporates extensive correspondence, writings, and organizational records chronicling Sanger's career as the founder and life-long leader of the American and international birth control movements; with rich documentation of her personal life, friendships and family.

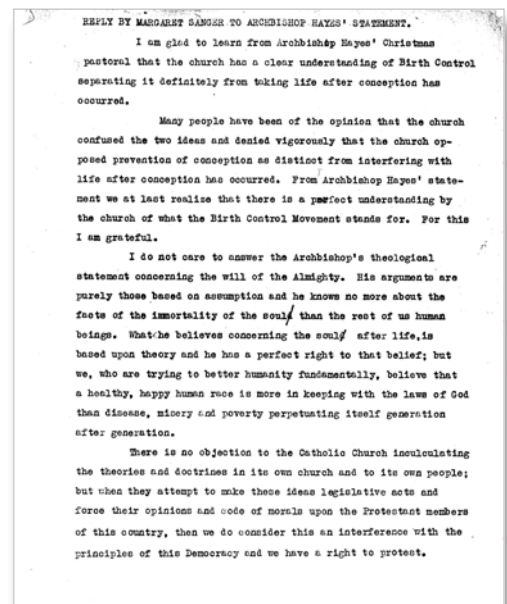
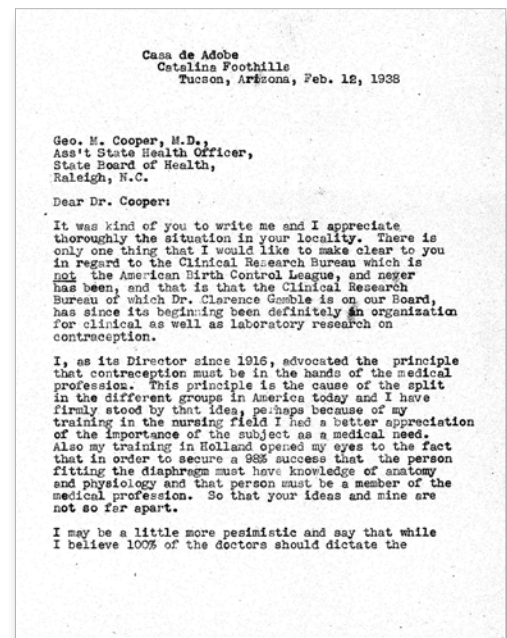
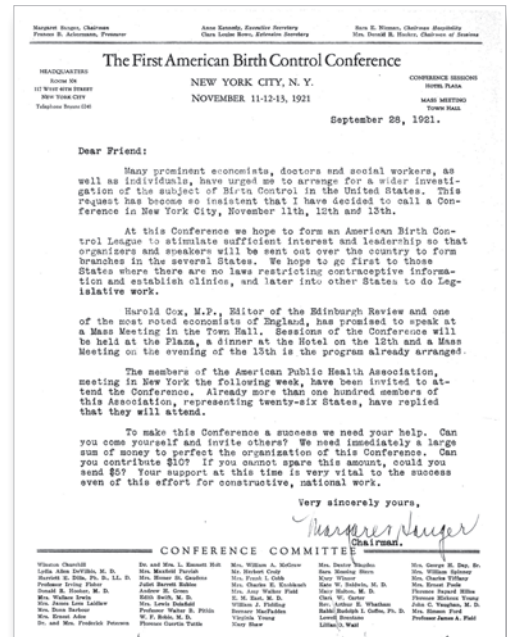
2) *The Collected Documents Series*, published in 1997, consists of over 9,000 documents located and collected by Sanger Project staff from repositories around the world. This series contains essential documentation of the American Birth Control League, Sanger's international work, including the founding of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, as well as a considerable amount of Sanger's personal correspondence. In addition, the Project has collected an additional 950 documents which will be digitized and published by ProQuest as a third series (*More Collected Documents*).

Documents in these two series were carefully described using item-level targets and arranged into the following five subseries:

1: Correspondence, 2: Organizational Records/Conference Materials,  
3: Legal/Governmental Material, 4: Writings, and 5: Miscellany

An additional 145 reels of material comprising the Margaret Sanger collection at the Library of Congress was microfilmed by the Library in 1977. Because this collection was not re-filmed by the Project, this microfilm lacks the identifying targets and organizational structure of the Project's two-series edition. Used in conjunction with the Library of Congress collection, these two series constitute the most comprehensive organized collection of documents relating to the history of the birth control movement. Unlike the published volumes which include less than 1% of the original 130,000 documents on the microfilm and focused largely on correspondence, this digitized collection includes organizational records, legal documents, and other miscellaneous material.

This new digital edition will serve as an important counterpart to the Project's digitized *Public Speeches and Writings*. This massive collection allows researchers to study the entire corpus of Margaret Sanger's papers, including all of Sanger's voluminous correspondence, writings, legal records, and the records of the birth control organizations she founded and led.







### About Professor Esther Katz

Project Director Esther Katz, a Research Scholar and adjunct Associate Professor (ret.) at New York University (NYU), founded the Sanger Papers Project in 1987. She had previously worked on other editing projects including *The Papers of William Livingston*, the *Letters of William Lloyd Garrison* and the *National Women's Trade Union League Records*. Prof. Katz, who received her doctorate in American History at NYU, had been the Associate Director for the Institute for Research in History. She has served as interim director of NYU's Program in Archives and Historical Editing, and has consulted on for a variety of institutions including in the Ford Foundation, MSNBC, and several documentary film and television productions.

For more info, visit: [https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/project/esther\\_katz.php](https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/project/esther_katz.php)



### About Dr. Cathy Hajo

Dr. Cathy Hajo, director of the Jane Addams Papers at Ramapo College, was an editor with the Sanger Papers Project from 1989 to 2015. She has a B.A. from Ramapo College of New Jersey, an M.A. and Ph.D. in History, and a certificate in Archival Management from New York University. Her work at the Sanger Project included assisting in all phases of editing including selection, proofreading, research, indexing and preparing the manuscript for publication. She worked on general administration of the Project, supervising students and interns, researching and writing grant applications and overseeing the Project's computer systems.

For more info, visit: [https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/project/Cathy\\_Hajo.php](https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/project/Cathy_Hajo.php)



### About Peter C. Engelman

Peter C. Engelman started at the Sanger Papers Project as a graduate research assistant in 1989. He has a B.A. from Connecticut College, an M.A. in American History from NYU, and is a graduate of NYU's Program in Archival Management and Historical Editing. He also received training in historical editing at the NHPRC's Editing Institute. Peter worked for the Project at the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College. He was engaged in all facets of editing work, including selection, research and writing, grant research and writing, and was responsible for writing and editing the Project's Newsletter.

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

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# Fight for Birth Control

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**MARGARET SANGER** OF NEW  
..YORK..

Editor of "The Woman Rebel," who was indicted for writing on the subject of Birth Control and recently discharged by the U. S. Federal Court,

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WILL LECTURE IN

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**Music Hall** Akron,  
Ohio

Exchange and High Streets

**Saturday, April 22**

AT 8:00 P. M.

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**Subject: "Woman and Birth Control"**

ADMISSION 25c

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