

A Matriarch With Many Sides:

Contextualizing Oregon's First State Librarian

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Another pivotal point in societal consciousness is brewing. Statues, plaques, and other representations of the controversial values of times foregone have tumbled and awareness of the transgressions of historical figures is at an all-time high. Increased awareness has awakened a reexamination period, an acknowledgment of the necessity for a holistic narrative about the people and events we choose to honor. With this modern lens of cultural value being used to highlight the actions of past leaders, the State Library of Oregon has begun its own introspection on who we venerate and how.

When visiting the second floor of the State Library on the Capitol Mall, one can find a small brass plaque dedicated to the first State Librarian and cofounder of the public library system as an institution in Oregon as we know it. This plaque displays the likeness of Cornelia Marvin Pierce rendered in relief, captioned very simply with her title as State Librarian and her years of service (1905–1929). The dates on the plaque reflect both her early role as the Secretary of the Oregon Library Commission (the predecessor to the State Library) and her later role as the State Librarian. As simple as it is, a caption like this has the power to hide a great many secrets.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the institution of the public library in Oregon was in its infancy with only three public libraries in existence in the state (Gunselman, 2004). It was the actions of a pair of women, Cornelia Marvin (later Cornelia Marvin Pierce) and Mary Frances Isom, who shaped the future of accessible books. Women's Clubs around the state had already begun building the foundation necessary for public libraries. It was on top of this foundation that Cornelia Marvin and Mary worked toward making the free public library a legislatively funded institution in the state with widespread public support (Schepke, 2006).

Having come to Oregon from Wisconsin (by way of Iowa and Illinois), Cornelia Marvin was an esteemed and well-trained librarian who pioneered and championed the ideas of traveling libraries and material delivery by mail in Oregon (Gunselman, 2004). Before the existence of a brick-and-mortar State Library, she headed the Oregon Library Commission and, with a meager budget, made materials accessible to all, from the urban elite to the most rural of communities.



Despite these impactful contributions toward accessible library services, Cornelia Marvin was also a fierce proponent of ideals that were markedly anti-humanitarian by modern standards. Of these ideals, her support for eugenics was the most vocalized.

Frances Galton, one of the fathers of eugenics, defined this concept with ancient roots as, “the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage” (Galton, 1909). This period-specific definition is expanded through the twentieth century as the “science” developed narrow focus points on concepts of selective breeding and sterilization, among others.

Thomas Leonard, a historian of American economics notes that, as a recognized field in the United States, eugenics truly exploded in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, taking a foothold in politics and formal legislation as early as 1907 (Leonard, 2016). According to his perspective, these eugenics policies had a profound impact on the development of the turn of the century economy. Contextualizing this historical moment of the movement quite plainly, he states that, “... eugenic ideas were politically influential, culturally fashionable, and scientifically mainstream” (p. 110). In Oregon, these “fashionable” ideologies would become law by 1920, and an eventual total of 2,648 Oregonians would be forcibly sterilized as a result of the legislation (Currey, 1977).

At the same time that these ideals reached their peak, Cornelia Marvin reached her pinnacle in librarianship as the head of the State Library of Oregon. Pierce saw the eugenics movement as highly relevant to her duties as the State Librarian, due to her responsibility to assess the allocation of public funds and resources (Gunselman, 2004). Gunselman illustrates the depths of Cornelia Marvin’s support for the movement by referencing this 1955 comment, “I believe my most important work outside of the Library was the backing I was able to give Dr. Owens-Adair in her long fight for legislation in making possible sterilization of the unfit.” This statement is exceptionally significant considering that Owens-Adair, Oregon’s first recognized female physician, was the number one pundit for promoting Oregon’s eugenics bills. Owens-Adair authored and promoted this legislation herself between 1907 and 1920, when a comprehensive version of her involuntary sterilization bill was passed as state law (Currey, 1977). Cornelia Marvin, wishing to ensure that state resources were not misallocated for the “unfit,” used her state platform to further this commonly held eugenics prerogative.

In addition to her strong associations with the eugenics movement, another trend is present in Cornelia Marvin’s actions, or rather inactions, following her tenure at the State



Cornelia Marvin Pierce (1905).



Library. Cornelia Marvin became Cornelia Marvin Pierce after marrying former Oregon governor Walter Pierce in 1928. She is believed to have catapulted his career as a congressman after their marriage but is also known to have been politically active herself, sometimes actively and openly countering the opinions of her husband (Gunselman, 2009; McCoy, 2009). While the depths of Cornelia's complicity with, and knowledge of Walter Pierce's opinions and prerogatives aren't fully known, it can be conjectured by her silence and lack of public challenge to his ideals, that they shared many of the same principal beliefs in Progressive Era social standards. Regardless of whether there were shared beliefs between the pair, Walter's actions tangentially link Cornelia to the racially motivated motions spearheaded by his office.

Historian Robert McCoy, in a critique of Walter Pierce, chronicles Walter's dealings with the Ku Klux Klan, where he was a known attendee at meetings and was given honorary membership. This article also illustrates Walter Pierce's strong anti-Asian sentiments, displayed plainly through his penning and supporting of many exclusionary laws against Japanese, Chinese, and "Mongolians" ownership of land in Oregon. In conjunction with these laws, he called upon counties to take roll of "oriental" persons within their bounds. McCoy goes so far as to call Walter Pierce an "ardent racist," with animosity not strictly limited to those of Asian descent but against immigrants as a whole (McCoy, 2009). At the time, these xenophobic and often anti-Semitic stances in personal and political arenas were commonplace. They were also inextricable from the eugenicist ideology seeking purity of the human race. In fact, many of these attitudes were the basis of racial supremacy movements globally. Notably, draft eugenics laws authored by Harry H. Laughlin, an American professor and eugenics movement kingpin, were later used as a basis for Nazi policies in fascist Germany in the 1930s to further racial purification efforts (Harry Laughlin & Eugenics, 2020).

It is safe to say that Cornelia Marvin Pierce, regardless of her personal opinions on these matters, was at least aware of her husband's participation in these xenophobic and racist efforts. No known protestation to these political attitudes exists from her perspective either. While we cannot attribute these opinions to Cornelia Marvin Pierce directly, her supporting role in her husband's political career built on these foundational stances is something to which, at least, attention should be drawn.


If we singularly apply a modern lens to examine Cornelia Marvin Pierce's personal and political actions, it would appear that her contributions to the state's foundation of the library as an institution are far outweighed by her associations with eugenics and other exclusionary movements. Despite this, however, she also contributed enormously to holistic community education through access to library materials and promoted the library as an institution for all. This contradictory juxtaposition of temporally popular politics and ideals is the starting line at which the State Library of Oregon hopes to engage readers and visitors.

Today, the State Library of Oregon's mission and vision stands in stark contrast to these eugenics principles. Our modern services would have upset and upended staunch eugenicists' support for the library institution. As a main charge, the State Library of Oregon operates Oregon's Talking Book & Braille Library, providing free access to audio and braille books to those who are print-disabled in the state. This directive is clearly laid out in Oregon Statute stating that, "The State Library shall provide library services to persons who are print-disabled by ... acting in cooperation with the Library of Congress in the provision of library materials and services for persons who are print-disabled. (ORS 357.008 (2))" As it might be imagined, this service would have likely been much to the chagrin of Cornelia



Marvin Pierce, who would have followed Harry Laughlin's 1914 doctrine, calling the "deaf" and the "blind" among those listed as "socially inadequate classes" (Laughlin, 1914). While this is chief among the obvious separations of the State Library from this terrible history, it is certainly not the only change in values.

In order to tell the whole story of Cornelia Marvin Pierce, the State Library is taking action to recognize both inaccuracies and absences in the portrayals and narratives of this important cultural figure. In this effort, Cornelia Marvin Pierce's plaque is now accompanied by contextual interpretive signage to meet the need for transparency regarding this figurehead. Additionally, all tours will be updated with new contextual information, our website's [history section](#) has been modified, and a future exhibit featuring Cornelia Marvin Pierce will include her darker side.

Contextualizing Cornelia Marvin Pierce's actions is the first step toward recognizing that the State Library has, through indirect association, contributed to the furthering of these movements against equity that occurred in the past, regardless of whether those attitudes reflect our values today. Our newest planning efforts include a vision to provide "equitable access to library and information services for all Oregonians" (State Library of Oregon Strategic Plan, 2020). A key step in realizing this vision is recognizing and addressing the inequities fostered by our past leaders as we commit to equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racist practices going forward. 

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