
| Mary E. Garofalo, RN, and Elizabeth Fee, PhD

THE FAMOUS NURSING

leader, M. Adelaide Nutting, said that Lavinia Dock was the “most noble, most unselfish, most largely helpful of women, a student, a scholar, in many ways the greatest spirit that has ever moved in our midst.”

Dock came from a prominent and wealthy Pennsylvania family and, with an income from inherited property, had no need to consider finances in making her vocational choices. Deciding to become a nurse, Dock studied at the Bellevue Hospital school for nurses in New York City. After graduation, she worked as a visiting nurse for a variety of charitable organizations, supervised a ward in a temporary hospital for those suffering from yellow fever, and went to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, to help flood victims. She also wrote *Materia Medica for Nurses*, the first nurses’ manual on drugs. The publication was financed by her father and it was a good investment: the book became the standard nursing school text on the subject and sold more than 100,000 copies.

In 1890, Dock was appointed assistant superintendent of nurses at the new Johns Hopkins Hospital. At Hopkins, Dock taught first year classes and was responsible for most of the ward instruction. She began a lifelong friendship with Isabel Hampton Robb, then the superintendent of nursing.

In 1896, at 38 years of age, Dock left John Hopkins to join her friend, Lillian Wald, at the Henry Street Settlement in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Dock moved into the Settlement, where she worked as a visiting nurse for twenty years. The Henry Street Settlement provided Dock with social, political, and emotional support to sustain her during her long career of professional and political activism.

Dock was passionate, compassionate, and unconventional, soon becoming an ardent pacifist and then a militant suffragist. She was first arrested in 1896 for attempting to vote and then joined the National Women’s Party, the most radical wing of the women’s suffrage movement. In 1912, she became a member of the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) and organized events for its members at the Henry Street Settlement. She walked in the picket line of the 1909 shirtwaist strike in which 20,000 workers, most of them women, walked off their jobs. Dock also spoke to a standing-room-only crowd at the New York Academy of Medicine, arguing that working women needed access to information about birth control. Dock told her nursing colleagues that their status would be decided by the attitudes they took toward the needs and problems of the working class. This ran counter to the belief of many nurses that they could define their professionalization by their very distance from ordinary workers.

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joined a group of women making a pilgrimage on foot from New York City to Albany, NY, in an effort to gain votes for women in New York. She then marched to Washington, DC, to demand the vote. Dock persisted in demonstrations at the gates of the White House, was jailed on several occasions, and served sentences at the harsh Occoquan workhouse in Virginia. As she later described these experiences: “It was a great joy to do a little guerilla war in that cause, and I believe that going to jail gave me a purer feeling of unalloyed content than I ever had in any of my other work.”

Dock worked hard and without much success to persuade other nurses to campaign for women’s suffrage. Some nurses claimed that, as a profession, it would be improper to take a political position, while others were simply opposed to female suffrage.

Dock was very active in international nursing organizations. In 1947, when the International Council of Nurses organized the first postwar gathering of nurses around the world to convene in Atlantic City, the United States government opposed any invitation being sent to Russian nurses. Dock, then 89 years old, was outraged. She wrote furious letters to George Marshall, the Secretary of State, and a most emphatic apology to the Ambassador of the Soviet Union to whom she introduced herself as “a friend of the Russian Revolution” and “a member of the American Council for Friendship with Russia.” She then deplored “the present wave of wicked, sad, and lamentable unkindness to the USSR” due to the “ascendancy in this country of reactionary elements typified in our millionaire corporations” wanting “oil, land, and the subjugation of workers of all countries.”

Dock had returned to Pennsylvania in 1922 and the 5 Dock sisters, all unmarried, lived together at the family farm near Fayetteville. Lavinia gradually lost her hearing, and although she seldom left home, she worked diligently with Isabel Stewart on an abridged version of *A History of Nursing*, the popular 2 volume work originally co-authored with M. Adelaide Nutting. Dock believed that nursing would not be fully accepted until its history had been soundly documented.

In 1956, after breaking a hip, she died of bronchopneumonia at age 99.

### About the Authors

Mary E. Garofalo is with the Clinical Center of the National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD. Elizabeth Fee is with the National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD.

Correspondence should be sent to Elizabeth Fee, Chief Historian, National Library of Medicine, 8600 Rockville Pike, MSC-3819, Building 38, Room 1E21, Bethesda, Maryland 20894 (e-mail: feeel@mail.nih.gov). Reprints can be ordered at http://www.ajph.org by clicking the “Reprints” link.

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### Contributors

Both authors contributed equally to the article.

### References


