

## INTRODUCTION

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# “Not Bad for an Old Lady”

I met Florence Hope Luscomb in the spring of 1971. I was in my second year of teaching U.S. history at the University of Rhode Island and was planning a new course on the history of U.S. social reform. A participant in the civil-rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s, I had written a doctoral dissertation on abolitionist reformers and was experiencing the heady but emotionally exhausting early days of the women's liberation movement. The only woman in my department of fifteen colleagues and the mother of a new baby, I was also raising my much younger sister and brother and struggling to reformulate my relationships with my husband at home and with my colleagues at work. When I told my friend Steven Halpern about my new course, he said that an eighty-four-year-old woman named Florence Luscomb, who had participated in the campaign for woman suffrage in Massachusetts, had taken a room in his crowded co-op on a no-longer-prosperous street near Central Square in Cambridge and that she would probably be happy to speak to my class about her experiences. A forthright, vivacious, and vigorous woman, Florence was happy to share her life's experiences and political wisdom with us.

My students and I had varying reactions to Florence's remarks. We were all used to a contemporary style that stressed psychological revelation, and Florence remained surprisingly mysterious despite her friendliness and willingness to answer questions. Her frank adoration of her mother and her acknowledgment of her mother's overwhelming influence seemed not only quaint but also vaguely embarrassing. Most of my students were struggling to keep the power of their mothers at bay in order to assert their adult selves and to strike out on their own; I had responded to the sudden death of my own mother in 1966 by trying not to think about her at all. Few of us were used to dealing with elderly women and men as peers, and the idea of a politically active older woman was even more exotic. The radical feminists in the class had the most complex reaction to Florence. They admired her independence and spunk but were more prone to

tolerate her than to learn from her. The suffrage movement had already been characterized in the early days of revisionist women's history as middle class, racist, and focused on liberal reform rather than radical change.

Over the next two years, Steve and I became intrigued by Florence. An editor of the Boston new-left newspaper *The Old Mole*, Steve was teaching himself photography, and Florence became one of his earliest subjects. We decided to interview her with an eye to writing something about her life, illustrated by his photographs. That summer, we spent a week at her rustic cabin in New Hampshire, sitting outside in the afternoon shade or the evening dark, squashing mosquitoes, and talking with Florence.

Patiently, she answered each of our questions, often with stylized anecdotes she had been telling for many years, but also with studied reflection grounded in the present. We talked a lot about current-day politics. We took rides in my car (she hadn't owned a car for decades) to her favorite scenic spots, and we ate overcooked chicken with gravy and blackberry Jello with figs, nuts, and heavy cream made from the recipes of Aunt Zadie (Florence's friend Zara duPont of *the du Pont* family). My initial nervousness began to abate as I realized that Florence saw our age difference as no barrier to a friendship based on mutual politics and personal regard. I stopped worrying that she would fall down. When we said goodbye, she was openly affectionate and later wrote that she was glad we had had the opportunity to become friends. And we came away with the basic outlines of her life on tape, despite the fact that we got confused in the dark and recorded one side of a cassette over another.

Florence Luscomb was born in 1887 in Lowell, Massachusetts, to Hannah Skinner Knox, an upper-middle-class woman with inclinations toward radical social reform, and Otis Luscomb, a working-class man and ne'er-do-well artist. Hannah S. Knox Luscomb had inherited income-producing property in St. Louis from her mother and grandmother, and it allowed her to leave her unhappy marriage when Florence was two years old. Otis Kerro, Florence's older brother, lived with his father for several years before rejoining his mother and sister. Florence grew up in a comfortable but modest middle-class home, never married, and was always eager to reveal that her relationship with her mother had been the richest and most important of her life.

Florence was the fourth-generation distillation of a Yankee middle-class family with radical predilections. Her great-grandmother and namesake, Hannah Skinner Kerr, persevered in Yankee social-reform efforts in the "wilderness world" of St. Louis in the early nineteenth century. Her grandfather Samuel Knox championed the unpopular cause of "black republicanism" in St. Louis and served briefly in the U.S. Congress as a representative from Missouri. Florence's mother, Hannah, joined the Knights of Labor and the Populist movement and considered herself a socialist and an advocate of women's rights. Florence was immersed in political activity from the time she was a small child. She almost always began her autobiographical account with an anecdote: In 1892, when she was five years old, her mother had taken her to a women's rights convention, and she had heard Susan B. Anthony speak. Whether she actually remembered Anthony's speech is relatively unimportant; for Florence, the experience connected her and her mother in real historical time to a founding heroine of the abolitionist

and women’s rights movement. I later found out, to my profound interest, that Anthony’s 1892 speech was given not at a woman suffrage convention but at a Midwestern People’s Party convention to which Hannah was a delegate. Florence had conflated her mother’s adoration of Anthony with woman suffrage and this first political memory, but Hannah’s political interests had ranged far more widely than votes for women. Although as a young adult Florence politely sparred with her mother over “your friends, the socialists,” she would eventually use her mother’s socialism as validation for moving to the left.

When asked who had influenced her life the most, Florence named her mother without hesitation. She talked about Hannah as though she had created herself: “My mother [was] a remarkable woman. . . . My mother’s mother died when she was only twelve [in fact, Hannah was fifteen]. She was sent away to boarding school. She wasn’t brought up in a family. She had to think out her decisions on public issues for herself. She was always progressive, although her family was upper-middle-class. . . . She lived to be in her eighties. We were very close.”<sup>1</sup> Although the reality was somewhat more complex, Florence took what she saw as her mother’s most admirable characteristics—her political independence, her progressive inclinations, her sense of humor, and her self-reflection—and tried to emulate her behavior through a long and useful life.

As Florence was also fond of noting, she and her mother were a pair, a family of two who lived in what Florence recalled as total harmony. Her father and brother remained peripheral images in her replaying of past memories. The happiest of these were of her mother and of the political work they had done together; their regular and pleasant domestic life in Allston, a middle-class suburb west of Boston’s Back Bay; and their mutual love of flowers, Gilbert and Sullivan, puns, poetry, automobile rides, and picnics. It was always important to Florence that she remain her mother’s daughter. Her lifetime of study, of political self-improvement, was aimed at carrying her mother’s vision of radical reform forward in critiques of imperialism, racism, and incursions against constitutional liberties.

Florence attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), one of a handful of women to do so in the early twentieth century. She graduated with a bachelor of science degree in architecture in 1909 and went into practice in Waltham, Massachusetts, with Ida Annah Ryan, an internationally acclaimed architectural designer who had also gone to MIT. Already a polished public speaker by the time she went to college, Florence threw herself into the last ten years of the campaign for woman suffrage. She was well known for her “open-air” speaking in the inner cities and outlying towns of New England, then an innovative tactic for middle-class women, who had confined their addresses to audiences in lecture halls. She traveled to Ohio, Virginia, New York, and London to agitate for women’s rights. Leaving architecture for good during World War I, ostensibly because of a wartime lack of building, she became a full-time professional reformer, holding a series of paid positions as executive secretary with groups such as the League of Women Voters and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Taking what she called a “risk with my tender reputation” by moving more decisively to the left in the 1930s, she organized a CIO office-workers’ union,

marched on picket lines of striking workers, and joined protests against the rising tide of fascism. She was enthusiastic and cautiously optimistic about the Soviet Union after she visited there in 1935 but never joined the Communist Party. A life-long civil libertarian, she was a relentless critic of red-baiting and found it entirely possible to work with American communists in Popular Front coalitions of liberals and leftists. Her decisions not to marry, not to pursue her profession, and not to turn to another woman for romance left her lonely for a soulmate and with a meager income. But they also freed her, to an extraordinary degree, to follow her conscience where it led her and to pursue a lifetime of service to progressive ideals.

Florence seems to have inherited the best of her mother's Yankee sensibilities, which included knowing how to establish a comfortable, regular routine and an uncomplicated approach to the mechanics of living, without the tendencies toward isolation and ever-climbing consumerism that often characterized the middle class. She was, however, unable to abandon her mother's notions of middle-class propriety, aversion to the disorder of poverty, and housekeeping ethos that assumed for many years that Irish servants were part of the natural order of things. Although she was occasionally blue and unclear about how to proceed, paralyzing self-introspection never became Florence's habit. As she grew older, her emphasis on the positive and her work ethic became an almost compulsive desire to be busy and useful. Certainly, Florence pursued political work out of a mixture of motives. She did it well; it was a source of great personal satisfaction and public acclaim from others; and it was a tangible way to accomplish progress and "do good works." It became a style of life, enmeshed with reading the newspaper at breakfast, doing a hard day's work, and contemplating and reading after dinner.

A participant in Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) outings in the White Mountains since World War I, Florence built her only permanent home, a summer cottage with no electricity or running water, in Tamworth, New Hampshire, in 1940. Tamworth, close to pleasant spring-fed lakes and in the shadow of Mount Chocorua, had long been the summer home of a variety of distinguished Bostonians. Chocorua, which Florence climbed every summer into her seventies, was visible from the clearing in front of her cabin, with a vegetable and flower garden in the foreground that she shared with a long succession of destructive woodchucks and beautiful hummingbirds. By the time I began visiting in the early 1970s, the cabin and its setting had the appearance of a shabby old shoe—still serviceable, but clearly wearing out. There was still no running water or electricity. Chopping wood, carrying water up from a stream and heating it to wash dishes, and treating the outdoor toilet with chemicals constituted the bulk of the day's housekeeping. Florence spent the summer reading—by kerosene lamp, when necessary—and catching up on a vast correspondence, writing political speeches and position papers, gardening, and entertaining guests.

Every fall for more than thirty-five years, Florence returned to a hectic political life in Boston after her summer of spiritual renewal in Tamworth. She did volunteer work at the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the American Civil Liberties Union; wrote letters to the editor; picketed with peace and civil-rights groups; and attended demonstrations, where she often was invited to speak. Unable to afford

her own apartment in Boston and tired of living alone, she and a group of students formed one of the first residential co-ops in Cambridge in the mid-1950s, and she would live in a series of these into her nineties. Long a student of China via Edgar Snow's 1938 *Red Star over China* and reports from friends who had lived on the mainland and known the first generation of Chinese communists, Florence became an enthusiast of the revolution. She had opposed American foreign policy in Asia since the Korean conflict, and wrote what other activists claim was the first leaflet in Boston to oppose U.S. involvement in Indochina—in 1954. She traveled to Cuba in 1961, and after attending a peace conference in Moscow in 1962, went via Japan, without a visa, to China, which was then officially closed by the United States to American citizens. Although her passport was suspended, she gained official permission to attend the 1975 International Women's Congress in East Berlin, where she was moved to tears by meeting the delegates from Vietnam. She felt deeply apologetic as a U.S. citizen for the human suffering inflicted by the U.S. military in Southeast Asia and characterized the war in Vietnam in 1971 as the worst crime against humanity “since Hitler massacred Jews mercilessly.”<sup>2</sup>

In Boston and Cambridge in 1969 and 1970, Florence, who was living among young men and women and was already well known as a civil-rights and antiwar activist, found herself called upon, in the earliest public meetings of the women's liberation movement, to link the first wave of the women's rights movement with the second wave. She had long seen a connection among women's rights, internationalism, and peace, and was happy to make it clear to others. She spoke repeatedly at demonstrations and teach-ins, where she reminded her listeners that women in the first half of the nineteenth century could be beaten with “a reasonable instrument,” had no legal claim to their own children, and were denied access to higher education and the professions. She presented herself as living history of the long struggle for women's rights, but she also underscored what she saw as the primary goals of the feminist movement: fighting sex discrimination in employment, securing reproductive rights, and ending war. In a speech on Boston Common in April 1970, she told her audience that “while we are meeting here these few hours . . . two mothers' sons will lie dead in Vietnam, and over fifteen will be wounded, blinded, maimed. We women demand, save the sons of America's mothers, stop this war *today*.”<sup>3</sup> Her growing disappointment over what she saw as the collapse of civility in the world and the role of the United States and other large powers in promoting undemocratic regimes and war seemed to be, in the last fifteen years of her political activism, tempered by her happier political memories of the suffrage movement. She hoped that the dynamism of women's liberation might build on its roots in the student left, the civil-rights movement, and the antiwar movement and achieve real political change, not just for U.S. women but for people around the world. As she said in another 1970 speech “If we bring . . . dedication, toil, and genius to today's struggles to complete the equality of women, and to win peace and a just social order, then truly, failure is impossible.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1972, Steven and I asked Florence whether we might write her biography. With her usual combination of modesty and straightforwardness, she said that would be

fine. Don't concentrate too much on me, she said, but use my life to tell the story of the movements of which I've been a part. She said that if she were to write an autobiography, she would write about that. She added, as near as I can remember: "Here is a story that needs to be told, a story that might help people see that they are not the first to fight against injustice, but a part of a history of struggle." This should have been a sobering warning for any prospective biographer, but we plunged ahead anyway. I began to keep bound notebooks of my thoughts about her, lists of research and interview leads (endless), and summaries of our meetings. In 1973, I wrote:

Florence tells us about her schedule on Inauguration Day. On the Friday afternoon preceding she gives an address to antiwar demonstrators at the Kennedy Center, then catches a train to Washington at 9:00 P.M. She gets no sleep on the train and arrives . . . to find very cold, windy weather. She demonstrates all day, then catches a train home that night; the train is delayed and arrives in Boston several hours late. [She] catches a breakfast, then goes to a service at Community Church because there's a speaker she wants to hear! ("Not bad for an old lady," she says.)<sup>5</sup>

I transcribed the interviews and mined them for clues. I was already looking over material about woman suffrage deposited in the Women's Rights Collection at Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library, but those documents turned out to be a small fraction of the extant record. In 1974, when Florence's co-op disbanded and she had to move, she asked Steve whether she could store several dozen cartons of her papers in his basement. When we asked to use them to document the biography, she readily consented. The papers proved to be remarkable: There were letters, diaries, photographs, correspondence, campaign literature, political leaflets, and petitions kept over a span of more than sixty years. We persuaded Florence that the papers were important enough to donate to the Schlesinger; the archivist Eva Moseley came to pick many of them up.

Steve was now working full time as a medical photographer and turned the project over to me. I kept at it the best I could while teaching full time, publishing, obtaining tenure, and rearing my children. Florence read the early chapters, suggested changes and cleared up errors, and answered my questions by letter in longhand. "Your letter duly received," she wrote in October 1974. "It is quite a cross examination."<sup>6</sup> I believe that she was both anxious about and flattered by all of this attention, and she politely but firmly offered her own interpretation of things. She was near tears with indignation over my attempts to describe Hannah; they simply weren't hagiographic enough. I began to dread her reaction to what I knew would have to be a less than idyllic portrait of her relationship with her mother in the 1920s. Speculation about Florence's sexuality or her psychological makeup also seemed out of the question.

By 1975, I had a draft covering Florence's life through the 1930s, although I never showed her the chapter describing her mother's death and her ensuing personal crisis—a crisis that is clearly evident in her letters. And as I reached the decade of the 1940s, the amount of information I had to synthesize to make sense of Florence's politics seemed to explode. There were several dozen more people I might have interviewed.

Samuel Knox and Hannah S. Knox Luscomb were still cardboard characters whose lives would require extensive research; I knew nothing about Otis Luscomb. I was growing nervous about the number of years it was taking to complete the book.

Florence’s living situation had remained precarious. Youthful co-ops tended to break up after a year or so and leave her homeless. She moved four times between 1971 and 1975, finally settling in 1975 at 64 Wendell Street, an endowed rooming house in Cambridge, happy to be back in town and close to the subway. But when my friend Judy Smith and I visited her at Tamworth in the summer of 1976, she seemed distracted and tired. The cabin looked dingy and in ill repair; the windows were grimy on the outside and coated with years of soot on the inside. Mold and mildew had permeated the bedding. I was worried that Florence might fall ill or collapse and go undiscovered for days; fire seemed an all-too-possible eventuality. There was nothing to do but worry at that point. She was where she wanted to be and still coping with the demands of daily life.

Indeed, Florence had every intention of continuing her current pace and lifestyle, and a rush of public acknowledgments began to offer her enormous personal validation. In February 1977, friends and political co-workers staged a ninetieth-birthday celebration for her at Boston’s Community Church, which she had attended for many years. She gave the sermon, introduced by her old ministerial colleague Donald Lothrop. Political comrades in progressive causes since the 1930s, she and Lothrop had weathered accusations of communist subversion by a Massachusetts state commission in the mid-1950s. In May 1977, Florence and Melnea Cass, an old civil-rights-movement friend from Roxbury, Massachusetts, were designated “Grand Bostonians” by the city of Boston, the only women in that year’s group of seven. Two of their long-term political opponents from the Massachusetts Republican establishment, Leverett Saltonstall and Henry Cabot Lodge, were also given the awards, and the unlikely combination sat on the dais to receive their accolades together. Florence wore a red, white, and blue dress. I wrote to her about a wonderful exhibit I had seen at the Brooklyn Museum on women and architecture, which included her senior drawings at MIT for a roman villa and information about her practice with Ida Annah Ryan. She thanked me for alerting her to the show, said she was about to travel to MIT, and reported that she was “as busy as usual—speaking engagements, committee meetings, etc.”<sup>7</sup> But that spring she fell and broke her wrist while planting her garden and was unable to get back to New Hampshire for the rest of the summer. Her injury required physical therapy, and she had to dictate her letters to friends. When she did resume her own writing, her letters were labored and brief.

Although I obtained her permission to release the interview selections for a Feminist Press edition of oral histories, and Florence penciled in corrections in a labored hand, she never “saw” the book. I was also, meanwhile, eager to have a second baby and did in June 1980, the same month that Florence, nearly blind and failing rapidly, accepted an honorary degree to a standing ovation at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. I was busy with a new child, and the next few years flew by.

On a rainy Saturday near the end of October 1985, feeling blue and unanchored, I headed upstairs from my bustling household to the solitude of my third-floor office.

Why I chose to look over my old manuscript about Florence on that Saturday is not clear to me. Although I didn't know it yet, my depression that fall, initiated by my attempts to sort out old sorrows and reconcile the demands of motherhood with those of scholarly research, were about to lead me into a lengthy period of reflection, mourning for siblings and parents lost to a string of long-ago tragedies, and the eventual construction of a more integrated self in a painful but redemptive three years of psychotherapy.

I was forty-one, and my life seemed nothing but overwhelming; I was in the middle of everything, with no chance of completing anything soon. My children ranged from preschool age to adulthood; a handful of female colleagues and I had recently concluded a long-drawn-out but successful sex-discrimination class-action suit against our employer; and although some of the journal articles I had written were receiving critical attention, I had yet to publish a scholarly monograph.

I recall feeling too paralyzed to work, nostalgic for Florence, and guilty that I had lost touch with her and not finished her biography. As I sat there reading my old work, I was once again drawn into the intriguing story of Florence; her mother, Hannah; and her grandfather Samuel. I could see that as a younger woman writing a biography of a much older woman, I had failed to evoke the losses, disappointments, and political frustration of Florence's middle years, a stage of life that I had now reached.

I am not a believer in mystical experiences and, indeed, have been known to be impolite, even hostile, to those who assert the influence of astrological forces or the existence of mental telepathy. But it turns out that Florence was dying while I was re-reading what I had written about her life. When a friend called on Monday to say that Florence had died peacefully in her sleep on Sunday, October 17, my inner summons to the attic office seemed, if not a preordained event, at least a profound coincidence. I thought about Florence a lot over the next few months. I attended her memorial service on December 8 in Boston's Back Bay at Arlington Street Church, the scene of many a twentieth-century protest meeting against violations of civil liberties, racial discrimination, and U.S. military policy. The service was pleasant but remote, as though memories of Florence were already in mothballs. None of the speakers conveyed what I knew to be her energetic, purposeful, witty, and engaging personality. I thought this was due almost entirely to the fact that, at ninety-eight, she had outlived her times and most of her friends.

In the next year or two I was to dream repeatedly of Florence and of my mother. It seemed that in recovering my mother's past and grieving her death in a car accident fifteen years earlier, I had opened myself up to claiming Florence as a spiritual and political guide to the future—an adopted foremother, if you will. Remembering my mother—now that I was almost as old as she had been when she died—seemed to allow me to re-embrace Florence, as well. In these dreams, my mother seemed agitated and unhappy, but Florence greeted me warmly, sometimes bathed alone in light, sometimes in a crowd of people at a meeting or a demonstration, but always looking serene and at peace. Not reproachful, she seemed to be ready to wait for me to reclaim her when I could, when I had finished my other “work.”

When I did return to Florence’s biography in the 1990s, I faced a new set of problems in trying to set her life into historical context. In 1973, the field of women’s history was in its infancy, but by 1990, a whole new body of sophisticated literature had appeared that made her story both understandable and part of a century of women’s and progressive political activism. When I began my study of woman suffrage, Eleanor Flexner’s fine *Century of Struggle* was one of the few available accounts of the women’s rights movement, but it did not go much beyond 1920. A new scholarship was emerging from my own cohort of academics in the mid-1970s. These scholars were formulating and debating the paradigms of women’s culture and women’s politics. The notion of women’s culture, first formulated by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in 1975, took what had been a negative view of the separate sphere of nineteenth-century middle-class women’s lives and argued that women’s separation into domesticity had created not only positive female roles but also a rich sororal subculture grounded in family relationships and friendships dating back to girls’ school and working days. Far from being totally oppressive, the constraints on women’s roles between the eighteenth and late nineteenth century allowed room for a “world of female love and ritual,” in which the extension of idealized mother–daughter relationships to a larger collective provided women with a richly nuanced peer-group alternative to their often unbalanced relationships with men. Growing opportunities for education and the taking up of responsible roles in the Protestant churches gave women self-esteem and the language to critique and analyze their political powerlessness. Nancy Cott argued in her 1977 *Bonds of Womanhood* not only that women’s culture was rich and rewarding, but also that it had created the possibility for the first organized articulation of women’s rights, led by a small band of activists that included the Grimke sisters, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Pioneering work by a variety of scholars showed that women from different ethnic groups and classes used these new possibilities to extend their influence through what Anne Firor Scott has richly described as “voluntary associations.” But this gray arena of public space remained somewhat problematical as an organizing principle because it was often dominated by middle-class women and did not necessarily seem to be “political” in the classic sense of the word.<sup>8</sup>

While underscoring the importance of women’s culture as a sociological phenomenon, Ellen DuBois, Mari Jo Buhle, and Alice Kessler Harris urged scholars to continue to work on women’s political history and their participation in mixed-sex groups, particularly in the suffrage, union-organizing, and turn-of-the-century radical movements. Angela Davis and Meredith Tax insisted that coalitions between women in voluntary associations and reform efforts could rarely patch over the divisive and troubling issues of race and class, with white, middle-class women often speaking for, and exercising power over, African American and working-class women.<sup>9</sup> The earlier work of some older women’s historians seemed to be of particular help here, especially Aileen Kraditor’s explanation of the connections between abolitionism and women’s rights; Kraditor’s and Flexner’s analyses of woman suffrage and the labor movement before 1920; and Gerda Lerner’s biography of Sarah and Angelina Grimke. All of these historians had, in fact, been leftists at mid-century and were used to avoiding elitist history.<sup>10</sup>

A younger historian, Elsa Barkley Brown, developed the important concept of “womanist consciousness” in her work on African American women’s history, and it has been particularly helpful in looking at the political work of both working-class women and women of color. Brown argued that most African American women found it impossible to extricate their feminist views from their struggles to advance their race; focusing on women alone could not achieve their more complicated political goals of class and race struggle.<sup>11</sup> But making women’s politics into something more than a history of how middle-class black and white women moved from abolitionism into women’s rights and then into the anti-lynching and suffrage movement was problematic for all of us.

Much of “our problem” stemmed from the dominant definitions of politics in the academic disciplines of philosophy, political science, and history. This definition, as Carol Pateman has observed, has its origins in Aristotelian philosophy and its reification in the transatlantic Enlightenment, which so influenced the rebellion by the “Founding Fathers” against England and the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. The political person in this tradition cannot be a slave, a non-citizen, or a woman. The best kind of political man is a middle-class property holder, whose self-interest will serve as a buffer between the poor and the rich and ensure a “democratic process” of compromise and consensus, guided by a rational political class. He engages in politics by voting, holding political office, and interpreting and maintaining a body of law based on precedent and narrow constitutional reasoning. Seymour Lipset, who wrote the classic treatise *Political Man* in 1959, reinterpreted Aristotle’s views for his contemporaries in the United States. Lipset, a sociologist, took political man and his political realm beyond the polling place and the legislative halls and courts of government to the arenas of political parties, religious faiths, and voluntary organizations—or to several sectors of what political scientists and anthropologists have described as “civil society.” Lipset was wary of political views coming out of religious movements, because he believed that religious commitment tended toward extremism and inflexibility and was incapable of moving toward the compromise and consensus that he, in the tradition of Aristotle and the Enlightenment thinkers, viewed as indispensable to democratic practice.<sup>12</sup>

An intellectual product of the twentieth century and its post–World War II antipopulism, Lipset, like his historian counterpart Richard Hofstadter, was also extremely wary of political parties organized outside the two-party mainstream of the United States. He was especially nervous about third or fourth parties organized by the psychological misfits suffering from so-called status anxiety as well as by the too-visionary, the too-radical, the too-reactionary. And he gave just two examples of “voluntary organizations” for political man in civil society: trade unions and professional associations. He focused on large, formalized and nationalized bodies of male Americans who could influence congressional policies or legislation; local politics and community activism seemed to play no role in the life of political man. Only three decades after the passage of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments, Lipset completely ignored two of the first and most successful mass political movements of the twentieth century—Prohibition and woman suffrage. Of course, his own definitions of politics

denigrated or excluded from consideration the places where these movements had been born and nurtured: in churches, women’s groups, and social-reform organizations.<sup>13</sup>

What we have to notice about Lipset’s formulations of “political man” is that they devise a normative world of politics and places of political practice from which women—and most persons of color—have been missing, at least until recently. This formulation ignores or discounts the places of politics where women and other outsiders were and still are most likely to come together—the family; community organizations; churches, mosques, and synagogues; social-reform movements; and clubs, to name a few—and reifies seats of government, political parties, unions, and professional associations as sites of politics, sites that until recently were male or nearly all male. As a vast body of literature on “separate spheres” has demonstrated, women (and others) engage in politics and think politically in these supposedly apolitical environments and through them have an influence on the political system, especially in community and local settings. Through voluntary associations and increasingly bureaucratized reform groups, moreover, women began to affect even national policy in significant ways, particularly in the progressive and New Deal years.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, when Samuel Knox, Hannah S. Knox Luscomb, and Florence Hope Luscomb were born, most women in this country could not vote or hold political office. Many were slaves. Others, whether slaves or not, had no property, and most had little control over their own bodies. Women could not, for the most part, practice law or become doctors. They were discouraged from joining labor unions, and almost no women became union officials. Women rarely served on executive boards of large voluntary organizations and were almost never the head officers of them. The only semipublic realms where women could hope to have some influence were in the Protestant churches, the women’s club movement, auxiliaries to men’s organizations, and the social-reform movements that hoped to make drastic changes in American moral behavior, such as the movements to end slavery, prostitution, and drunkenness and, the most radical of all enthusiasms—one condemned by ministers, politicians, newspaper editors, and college professors alike—the women’s rights movement. Denied access to lecture halls and legislatures, these movements often met in churches, giving them a semireligious, seemingly apolitical tinge. The few mixed-sex groups willing to take women’s activism in the political sphere seriously in these years usually consisted of other outsiders, such as spiritualists and African American equal-rights advocates, or the radical political parties that Lipset believed posed a potential threat to democratic stability—for example, the Populists, the socialists, and radical working peoples’ organizations such as the Knights of Labor. But by focusing on these more peripheral spaces beyond “political man’s” sphere of activity, we can find political woman and her politics. We can trace how she came to find the talent, the voice, and the political savvy to mount a politics for herself and on behalf of others.

New evidence about Florence’s life became available after her death in papers she had kept among her immediate possessions. Among the items that she carried with her and kept in her rooms through all her moves was a cache of Hannah’s letters. These

have provided a sense of Hannah's personality and sunny presence in Florence's life that I had intuited but can now document for certain. Other papers processed by the Schlesinger Library since Florence's death include her income-tax returns. Like many others, I had believed that Florence lived in co-ops for political reasons or because she liked young people—or because, as in her own self-reporting, she just didn't like living alone. I assumed that she was a woman of substance who had inherited some wealth and chose to live modestly and give a lot of her income away; many a friend and acquaintance of Florence's presented this scenario, and Florence herself to some extent fostered its propagation. But her tax returns tell a far different story. Hannah had left her income-producing property in St. Louis to Florence and her brother when she died in 1933, and Florence reported a yearly income from it to the IRS ranging from \$2,600 to \$3,000 through the 1950s. But as St. Louis began to disintegrate in the 1950s, this property was not worth very much. Florence and her brother sold it in 1958, and after subtracting its depreciation costs, Florence reported her share to the IRS as \$12,000. She sold the rest of the property in 1961, when her annual income reached a one-time high of \$8,671. Although Medicare, enacted in 1965, eventually helped her pay her doctors' bills, she had reported several hundred dollars in medical expenses every year for twenty years, including \$560 for the dentist in 1952. Perhaps as a result of this encounter (and perhaps to qualify for Social Security), Florence worked for a female dentist for a few hours each week during the winters of 1952 to 1960 and listed her occupation on her tax returns as "dental assistant." By 1961, she had "retired." When her brother died in 1965, childless and having been widowed twice, he left his estate to Florence, adding \$25,000 to her interest-producing savings, which, aside from her cabin in Tamworth, were her only assets. Florence had to live on this interest and pay her property taxes in New Hampshire from it, as well. In 1967, despite the money that had been cleared from her brother's estate, Florence's yearly income was still less than \$3,000, and would stay at that level into the 1970s.

Florence was a classic example of an elderly person living on a fixed income in a Northeastern city whose real-estate values skyrocketed in the years following World War II. Her relatively comfortable income in the price-deflated years of the Depression did not go very far in the boom years of the 1940s and put her well below the poverty line in later decades. Having given up her car much earlier, she was forced by the mid-1950s to turn to some kind of boarding or joint-living situation, and although she claimed to enjoy it, communal living never provided her with a permanent home.

The co-ops, as anyone who has lived in them can testify, were interesting social experiments, but they were also full of conflicts over lifestyles, finances, and allocation of cleaning and cooking responsibilities. Florence's middle-class sensibilities were, no doubt, constantly in peril. Her papers include a hand-lettered sign that reads, "If you expect me to cook, I must have a sink free of other people's dirty dishes. FL," and a poem entitled "The Cooperative Spirit, or Getting By":

When the sugar bowl you drain,  
Never fill it up again. . . .

Leave dirty plate and glass and cup,  
 The living room to clutter up. . . .  
 After sweeping never dust . . .  
 When you put away a pot,  
 Stick it on the nearest spot.  
 Getting by, getting by,  
 Leave it to the other guy.<sup>15</sup>

Young people were living temporarily in modest digs while they went to school or did political work and experimented with communal living. Florence was consigned to the arrangement permanently. Sometimes she was rejected as a housemate because she was elderly. She began taking a résumé to co-op interviews to prove her political worthiness and devotion to communal living.

By the time Florence reached Pleasant Street in 1971, her personal possessions had dwindled to a worn blue velvet sofa that she contributed to the living room, a bureau, a bed, a desk, books, and framed pictures of Madame Sun Yat Sen, Zara duPont, Alice Stone Blackwell, and Paul Robeson. Fortunately, her Tamworth cabin still provided a real home, at least in the summer, and she did not sell it until she was confined to a nursing home and needed to qualify for Medicaid. Eligible for Supplemental Security Income benefits in the 1970s and with her medical expenses covered, Florence managed to get by, partly because of her “rediscovery.” She began to net a small income from speaking engagements at colleges and universities. As she wrote to Susan Koppelman Cornillon of St. Louis in 1975, she always expected to be reimbursed for her travel expenses but never required “a speaking fee, tho’ naturally I do not refuse one if offered.”<sup>16</sup> A trip that Cornillon arranged for Florence in 1976 netted her \$1,225 in speaking fees. In 1977, Florence gave \$650 away, mostly in amounts ranging from \$10 to \$25, to several dozen political organizations, including the Wounded Knee Legal Defense Committee, Steelworkers Fight Back, the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Community Church, the Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, the NAACP, and Women for Racial and Economic Equality. To the end, Florence maintained her mother’s integrity and devotion to progressive causes, keeping up the pretense of a middle-class lifestyle and its beneficence, despite her precarious financial situation.

I have complemented these new materials from the Schlesinger Library with extensive research into the lives of Samuel Knox and his daughter Hannah in western Massachusetts and St. Louis. Samuel Knox remains an elusive figure who left only a few professional letters behind. Fortunately, other members of his extended family left a cache of priceless family papers to the Missouri Historical Society. Although Hannah knew or was related to a number of famous men, including Edward Bellamy, the utopian novelist and inspiration of the Nationalist movement; Frederick T. Greenhalge, a mayor of Lowell and a governor of Massachusetts; and Reuben Atwater Chapman, one of John Brown’s lawyers and a state Supreme Court justice of Massachusetts, I have found none of their papers and assume that they did not survive. With a few significant

exceptions, Hannah was as relentless in destroying evidence from her life as she was in preserving a record of Florence. Nevertheless, it has been possible to reconstruct these nineteenth-century lives and relationships using both logic and speculation.

In returning to and rethinking this biography, I have explored several themes of women's and political history. The first of these is how a legacy of reform can be passed from generation to generation but modified significantly in the face of changing circumstance. I have placed Samuel, Hannah, and Florence in the context of local activism with the premise that when we dwell on national leaders or intellectuals, we ignore the hard—and seminal—work of people based in communities who make social and political change possible. Samuel Knox brought antislavery politics to antebellum St. Louis, and his daughter was an important activist in the Bellamy Nationalist movement in Boston in the 1890s. Florence remained an important liaison between radicals and liberals in Boston throughout her life. I argue that until recently, local politics has overlapped women's politics. I want to complement the work of other scholars that aims to restore to the historical memory the importance of networks of "political women." I am especially interested in those who might be described as leftist suffragists and the extent to which they continued to articulate a radical position in women's politics after 1920. I also add to a growing body of literature that sees McCarthyism and assaults on the left after World War II as a devastating blow not only to civil liberties but also to a vigorous array of local progressive movements that gave many women an opportunity to be political persons in an array of organizations, ranging from the local level to the national arena and even international settings.

In tracing the lives of Hannah S. Knox Luscomb and her daughter, Florence, I have uncovered a community of Boston women who affected the politics of their city, their state, and even their country in ways that Lipset and others would describe as real politics: formulating policy and legislation, campaigning for political office, lobbying legislative bodies, and building unions. Although a homosocial women's culture was a critical aspect of their lives, and one cannot envision their being "political" without it, their politics were not always a product of this culture, nor did these women remain entirely immersed in this culture. Left motherless as a teenager, Hannah grew up surrounded by brothers, uncles, and male cousins. Her abolitionist father was her chief political inspiration, but he was also a parent from whom she had to separate emphatically to claim her own identity. Although Hannah must have remembered warm associations with her deceased female relatives, she had close male friends throughout her life and often joined mixed-sex reform groups and political parties. With the demise of Bellamy Nationalism and the Knights of Labor, however, she found her longest-lasting political home in the woman suffrage movement. Its female network provided a hospitable social alternative to her failed marriage, allowed her to lead a respectable and full life as a single parent, and created the context for rearing her daughter in the early twentieth century as a self-confident, independent-minded political activist who frequently challenged sexism and broke new boundaries for independent women. In the decades of the 1910s and 1920s, Florence built on her relationship with her mother and her mother's friends in the suffrage movement and continued to develop politically fruitful

and emotionally satisfying relationships with women, many of them many years older than she was. She also worked effectively in mixed-sex organizations and political settings.

Florence’s attraction to mountain climbing in the 1920s turned out to be a piece of this combination of women’s culture, heterosocial activism, and female adventurism. Climbing was one of the first acceptable sports for women in the mid-nineteenth century, and the Boston-based Appalachian Mountain Club became a venue for women-led climbs in the 1920s. The climbs gave women a chance to claim expansive new boundaries in physical space and to master trailblazing arts that were once the exclusive domain of men.

The three most famous female mountain climbers of the early twentieth century were all from proper New England families and had hiked in the White Mountains as children. Fanny Bullock, a daughter of a governor of Massachusetts, was the first woman to climb extensively in the Himalayas. Annie Smith Peck, the first person to climb Mount Husacaran, later planted a Votes for Women banner on top of Mount Coronado. And Miriam O’Brien Underhill, who ascended Chamonix in 1926, pioneered what she called “manless climbs.” She was the first person to climb all forty-six of the White Mountains’ highest peaks in winter.<sup>17</sup> Florence served on the AMC Committee on Publications in the late 1920s with Miriam O’Brien; climbed extensively in the Green, Adirondack, and White Mountains (she camped on Mount Washington five times, once in winter); and was not beyond making a point of what climbing meant to women’s self-esteem. Lost on an unmarked trail in New Hampshire with three women and “one husband” on a hot backpacking trip in the summer of 1925, she used her compass and map to “assume responsibility for leading the party,” thirsty as it made camp for the night, then making its way the next day to a lake and dismissing the husband while the women bathed and played in the water.<sup>18</sup>

Florence was a figure who bridged the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, someone who personally witnessed the decline of separate spheres for women and increasingly found that the post-suffrage women’s movement had outlived its progressive possibilities. She left the genteel world of New England women’s groups behind to pursue radical causes grounded in heterosocial political practice. In doing so, she certainly experienced something of a double bind: While she found a new kind of dynamic politics, none of these groups came close to providing the affirmative emotional support she had received in the suffrage movement, and none came close to articulating a truly feminist viewpoint. Liberal and leftist cross-gender groups continued to be problematic for women. Ranging from unions to peace movements and the Progressive Party, these groups were always dominated by men, and women did not have many opportunities to exercise the kind of influence they had wielded or the leadership they had demonstrated in separate-sex organizations. Florence would have made a fine head of the Massachusetts Civil Liberties Union, for example, or could have served on many an organization’s national board; these and other positions were closed to her, mostly because of her gender. But given a choice among the remnants of women’s political culture, which were becoming increasingly conservative, Florence thought it logical to abandon them

as they failed to meet the challenges raised by the Red Scare of 1919 and recurring cycles of red-baiting, the Great Depression, and the deteriorating world order. For me, the question has become not why she fit so well into women's culture in the 1910s and 1920s, but what gave her the courage and self-awareness to leave it in the 1930s. Although the way had been paved for Florence by her own mother and by her substitute mothers, particularly Alice Stone Blackwell, Elizabeth Glendower Evans, and Zara duPont, very few women of her age and class made this move.

A strong piece of my attraction to Florence in the early 1970s was that she was unlike any woman I could recall knowing and opened the door on the lives of other such women. Most of my friends and I had grown up in the 1950s and had been socialized to focus on men and dismiss women as frivolous or as sexual competitors. We were just discovering the kinds of relationships with female relatives and friends that Florence had taken for granted. We knew few women who were as self-confident and as unconcerned with their femininity as Florence. I had learned next to nothing in graduate school about the history of women, and Florence was like a first textbook in women's history—and a living one, at that. Learning more about Florence and presenting her story in a public way became both a politics of the personal and an intellectual pursuit.

Looking back, I'm sure that I overestimated her self-determination and exceptionalism. Florence's political activism made her unique, but so did the fact that she had never married and had no children—at the time, the two seemed to be necessary conditions for each other. I had two vigorous grandmothers, one of whom had lived alone for many years in San Francisco, and another who had run a boarding house in a small northern California town, but both had built their lives around their relationships with their children and grandchildren. Although my father's mother in San Francisco was an ardent Democrat and earned extra money as an election-board polling supervisor, I thought, at that time, that no one in my family—woman or man—had ever engaged in day-to-day political work. But after I published a 1975 article about the Massachusetts campaign for woman suffrage that highlighted Florence, I showed it to my maternal grandfather. He informed me—never thinking the incident had much importance before—that he had been drafted by my great-great-grandmother Cynthia Lisetta Stearns Vose to go door to door in Los Angeles with Votes for Women leaflets. Cynthia Vose, it turned out, had been active for many years in the Grange and the People's Party movement in the Midwest, as well as in the women's temperance and suffrage movements. My grandfather wrote a high-school paper on Marxism, a composition buried in his own mother's mementos and recently found by my cousin Lois. My great-grandmother Nellie Stearns McCormick had worked in the women's club movement; because she was tall and thin and had a long nose, she often portrayed Abraham Lincoln in theatrical productions. Florence made me aware, just as I was beginning to rethink the strictly maternalist destiny set out for me by my mother and my aunts, that some women in the past—indeed, in my own family—had made choices few women of my generation knew anything about and that were largely omitted from accounts of the past I was teaching in the college classroom.

On some level, I wish I had presented a biography of Florence to her before she died, but I know this is a better book without the inherent censorship her presence would have imposed. Most daughters, even self-appointed ones, must come to terms with the frailty and confusion, as well as the nobility, of their mothers’ lives. I believe that reclaiming my own mother in this way has helped me to understand myself and to see Florence and Hannah in a more nuanced, realistic light. I find it out of the natural order of things that I am more than fifteen years older than my mother was when she died. But crossing and going beyond that threshold of her age has also allowed me, in some ways, to strike out on my own in uncharted territory—to write books, as it were—as well as to have children.

The years of my adulthood have flown by, and I often find it difficult to grasp how old I really am. It has been extraordinary to return to writing this book in my middle years, in the midst of all the compromises, joys, and coming-to-terms that this stage of life presents. Sometimes in my dreams, all of the contradictions of past and present are resolved: Florence is eighty-five again, and I am thirty-two; I present her with this version of her life, and she is able to accept it as my final accolade.