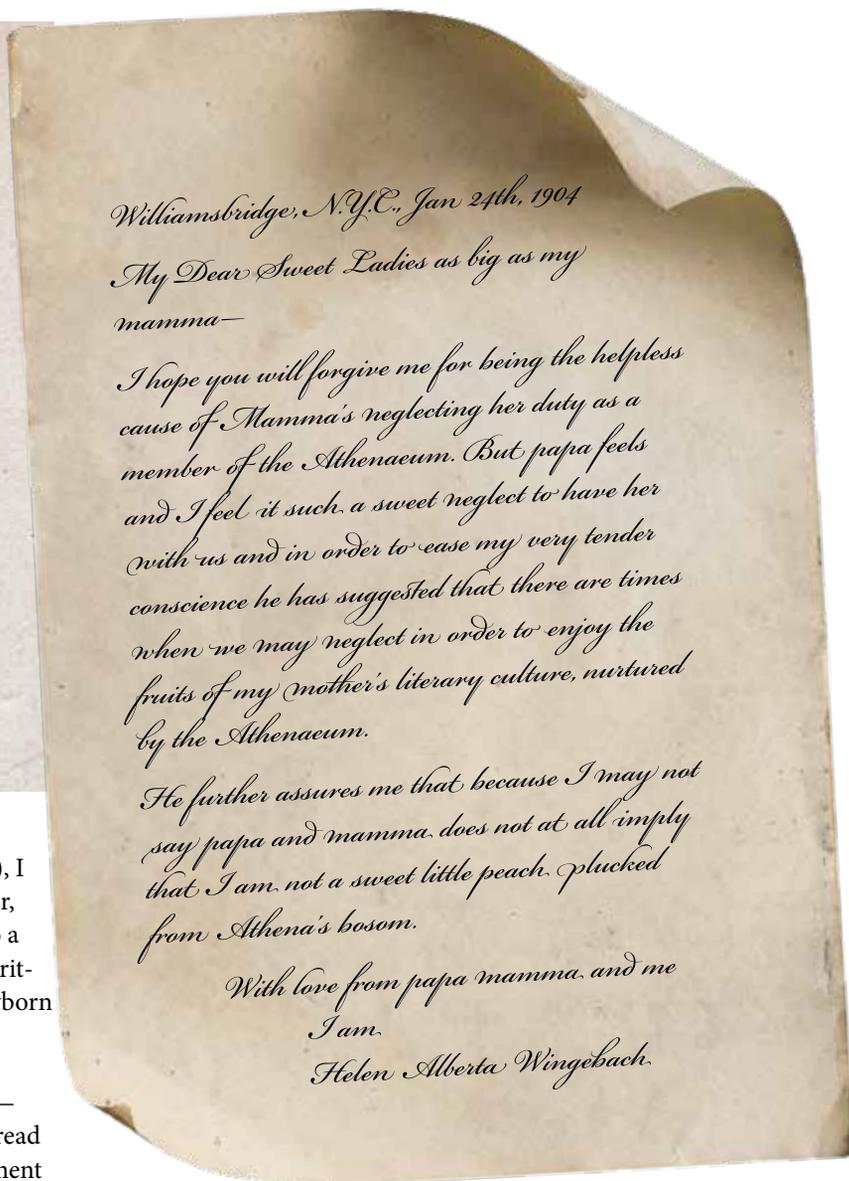


A Clubwoman's Letters

Middle-Class Feminism in the Early 1900s



While reading an old letter (recreated on the right), I received my first clue that my great-grandmother, Mary Davies Wingebach (1872–1951), had belonged to a women’s club. Mary’s husband, August, had playfully written to Mary’s fellow club members on behalf of his newborn daughter (my grandmother).

By referring to “literary culture,” this endearing note indicated to me that the Athenaeum—then unfamiliar—had been a part of Mary’s intellectual life. When I first read the letter, I had never heard of the women’s club movement and had not yet learned that as a “club woman,” Mary was participating in a nationwide movement of middle-class feminists in the early twentieth century.

I realized that I had two photos labeled “Athenaeum Club,” dated 1908 and 1914, both with Mary in the center, glowing with happiness and self-confidence. We have few family photographs from this period, so the existence of these images suggest that the club must have been important to her.

Williamsbridge, N.Y.C., Jan 24th, 1904

*My Dear Sweet Ladies as big as my
mamma—*

*I hope you will forgive me for being the helpless
cause of Mamma's neglecting her duty as a
member of the Athenaeum. But papa feels
and I feel it such a sweet neglect to have her
with us and in order to ease my very tender
conscience he has suggested that there are times
when we may neglect in order to enjoy the
fruits of my mother's literary culture, nurtured
by the Athenaeum.*

*He further assures me that because I may not
say papa and mamma does not at all imply
that I am not a sweet little peach plucked
from Athena's bosom.*

*With love from papa mamma and me
I am.*

Helen Alberta Wingebach.



Violet Snow is a journalist and memoirist who has written extensively about her ancestors. Her great-grandmother's letters have inspired a character in Violet's historical novel about suffrage and women's clubs, entitled *To March or To Marry* (available in late May 2021 from Amazon.com). Photo by Dion Ogust.

During an online search, my mother discovered a 1910 directory entitled *Club Women of New York*. Among over two hundred organizations enrolled in the New York City Federation of Women's Clubs was this one:

The Athenaeum Club of Wakefield [a section of the Bronx at the northern edge of New York City] was organized January 18, 1898. The object is the intellectual and social improvement of its members. Meetings are held every Tuesday at 2:30 pm from October through June, inclusive.

President, Mrs. August Wingeback

So, I learned Mary not only attended weekly club meetings but later became the club's leader. I was impressed.

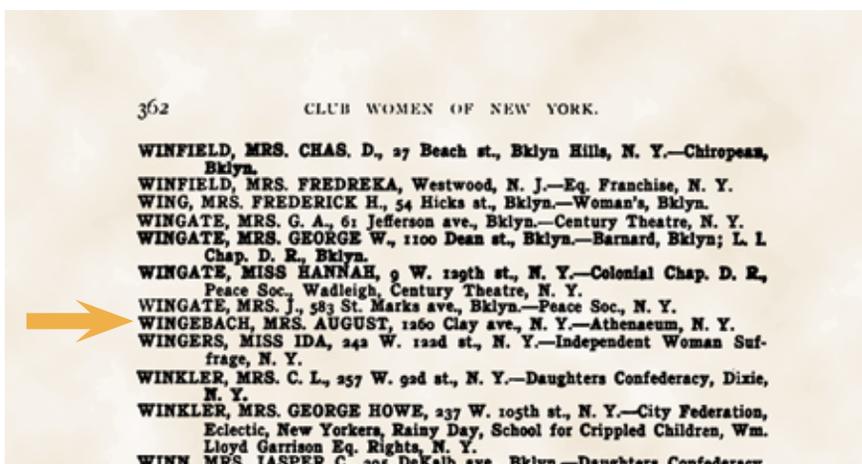
A typeset letter, printed in green ink, then surfaced among the many documents Mary had saved. Sent by the New York City Federation of Women's Clubs, it invited delegates to the 1910 autumn convention, to be held at the Hotel Astor. On the letterhead, Mary was listed as the Federation's Director for the Borough of the Bronx.

The Convention consisting of morning and afternoon sessions will be called to order at 10 A. M. and 2 P. M. in the large ball room with recess for

buffet-luncheon to be served at one o'clock. . .

BUSINESS. 'Delegates will be asked to pledge their annual club subscription to the Scholarship Fund which is for the purpose of paying to a little girl under 14 years of age the wage she could earn and so allowing the child to attend school without depriving the mother of the money necessary for the support of the family.

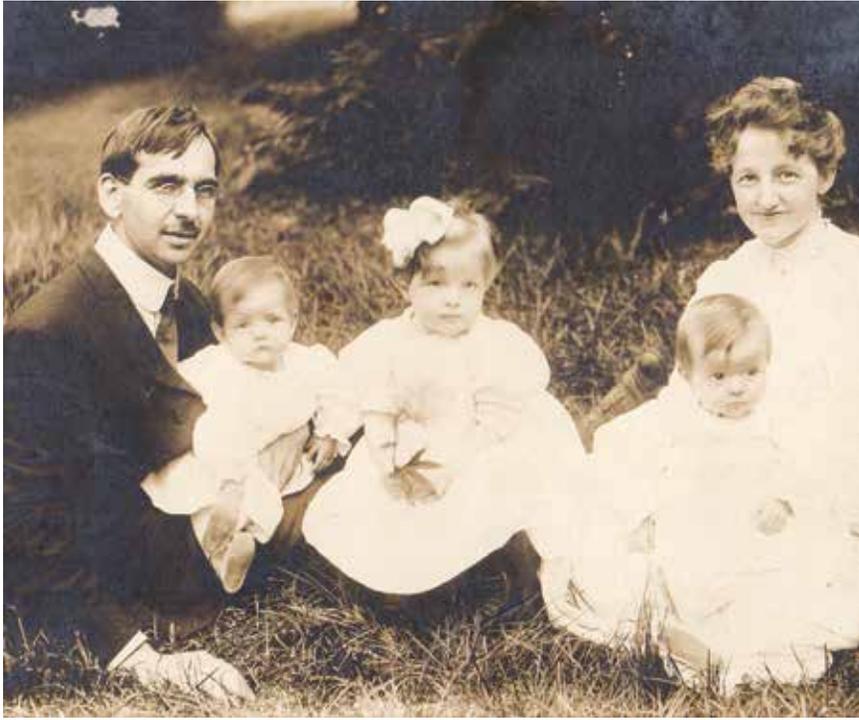
I had tears in my eyes, picturing my conventional, solidly middle-class great-grandmother making a generous donation to a working-class girl, offering her an opportunity to rise in the world. I noted that the concern shown



Previous page: Mary Davies, circa 1900, prior to her marriage to August Wingeback. Paper image by Shutterstock.com/Valentin Agapov.

Left: A directory listing in *Club Women of New York*, 1910–11, from HathiTrust.org. Below: The Athenaeum Club in 1914. Mary is shown above the "x."





August and Mary Wingeback with their children, Wilfrid, Helen, and Arthur, 1906.

by the Federation extended not only to girls in need but also to the women of the household, shown by the phrase “without depriving the mother.” The Federation letter also showed a level of organization and unity I had not expected.

I decided to research women’s clubs and ordered a copy of *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868–1914*, Dr. Karen J. Blair’s 1980 study of the women’s club movement. Dr. Blair wrote that radical suffragists had considered women’s clubs conservative and inconsequential, but her research showed that these clubs had served as training grounds that helped homebound housewives transition into new roles that included public speaking, business management, and government service.

Jane Cunningham Croly founded Sorosis, a club for professional women (and one of the country’s first significant women’s clubs), in 1868, and later established the Federation of Women’s Clubs in 1889. In her writing, Croly articulated many of the principles that were expressed through women’s clubs. She wrote that the feminine devotion to home and childrearing made women morally superior to

men, whose focus on money-making and politics had warped society. Croly believed that women had to emerge from their homebound state to keep the beauty of art and literature alive and pass them on to the next generation. Furthermore, she thought that women’s domestic talents and interests enabled them to identify social problems that needed fixing, from child labor to public health issues. Many of the government services we now take for granted—such as citywide trash collection and mandatory meat inspection—were instituted with the help of women’s clubs, whose members lobbied for the relevant legislation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Although some clubs were formed in support of women’s right to vote, many more not only disapproved of suffragettes’ “unladylike” marching and picketing but also banned discussion of the controversial topic at club meetings. Nevertheless, by gathering regularly to discuss subjects of both literary and social interest, women gained self-respect and self-confidence while forming sisterly bonds. Ultimately, the clubs revolutionized

society by changing Americans’ expectations of women.

A few years later, I found additional letters from Mary to her mother showing that the club continued to be an important presence in Mary’s life.

Tuesday, Nov 22, 1904

... August took care of Helen to-day while I went to Mrs. Hoag’s to the Club. We had a real nice time,—one good paper. Mrs. Hoag had rather a Thanksgiving looking table, nuts, grapes, coffee and cake to eat, while the table was trimmed with greens, apples and a pumpkin.

While some women’s clubs emphasized social reform efforts, the Athenaeum, like many other groups, was a literary “study club.” The “one good paper” Mary mentioned in her letter refers to the focus of the study club’s activities. Each spring, before the Athenaeum’s summer hiatus, the Program Committee set a list of topics for the fall, winter, and spring. Members were assigned subjects to research, usually a writer, artist, or historical figure, and papers on these topics were read aloud at the meetings. That season Mary heard a report on painter “Francis [sic] Millet,” and she herself wrote on Napoleon III. Most likely the Athenaeum had chosen a French theme for 1904–5.

While the above letter excerpt emphasized food and table decorations more than the content of the “one good paper,” Mary was writing to her mother and perhaps selecting topics that would be of the most interest to her. These domestic references also reveal the housewifely aspect of the clubs that made them so popular and accessible to their members (more than 1.5 million women by 1914).

I can imagine why Mary was inspired to join a women’s club. From

the age of fourteen until her marriage at thirty, she had worked as a secretary. She was part of the wave of female office workers who first became a force in the 1880s, their slim, nimble fingers ideal for operating the new typewriting machines. Mary surely enjoyed her independence as a working girl, as well as the opportunity to mingle with authors at Dodd, Mead Publishing in Manhattan. She saved a file of business correspondence from authors who are not well-known today but were renowned at the time.

Marrying August Wingeback meant that Mary quit her stimulating job to keep house for her husband, a violinist and music teacher whose income wasn't sufficient to allow for hired help. Mary must have been shocked to find herself stuck in the house day after day, cleaning, cooking, and performing the arduous task of washing laundry, which filled a whole day each week. ("I have just built a fire," she wrote on July 25, 1904, "for to-morro is wash-day, the day I hate above all others.")

But Mary was not prone to the radicalism of the suffragists. Instead, the Athenaeum Club gave her a life of the mind that was compatible with her duties as a wife and mother. On January 22, 1905, amidst accounts of her sewing projects and baby Helen's adorable antics, Mary's letter to her mother mentioned that she would be reading a lot in the next few days, since she had a paper due for her club the following week.

A month later Mary reported how she prioritized club duties and how club members relied on her participation.

Friday, Feb. 17, 1905

... I did not attempt to clean my house, as I had all I could do to get away to go to Mrs. Springer's for the Club meeting ... [T]he last business meeting Mrs. Varian sent over a report and told Mrs. Lappe to

get me to read it, as I seemed to be able to read anything off at sight. Mrs. Varian I know quite depends on me this year, she is President, and so many have been away, or failed to bring in their papers. I have been able to go steadily, and so far have had all my papers on time.

The clubwomen had also become her friends and Mary shared in their joys and sorrows.

More Club news. Mrs. E. Caterson gave birth to a daughter last Monday morning, and so far has gotten along all right. You will remember she was the one who lost a baby at seven months last November. We are all so glad she got through safely this time. The latest news is that Mrs. Lowitz is expecting. It is not supposed to be known, but has leaked out. I never suspected it until Mrs. Hoag told me. So the Athenaeum babies are increasing.

One club member's husband was an amateur musician and became friends with August, whose work included playing violin for services at Judson's Church in Greenwich Village.

Mrs. Hoag ... wants us to go to their house next Sunday. She wants us to come early and go to church while she takes

care of Helen, then we will have dinner there. Mr. Hoag wants August to help him get up something in the way of an entertainment to pay off balance on piano, \$55.00, and they want to talk it over.

Unlike many husbands, August was happy to take care of his daughter while Mary went off to her club meetings. One Tuesday afternoon in May 1905, however, August had to work, so Mary decided to take the eighteen-month-old to the meeting.

Mistress Helen was very, very good while the business went on. The only trouble came when I wanted to stand up and read my paper. She wouldn't go to any one, and finally they gave her a cracker. I had to sit down and hold her on my lap, and you remember she has a sing-song when she eats. Well, I had to read loud to drown her voice, but altogether it passed off all right, and I think they enjoyed my paper very much. ... But I don't believe in taking the children to the regular meetings. They attract and distract the attention of the women, naturally, and it isn't fair to the person having a paper.

Mary's twin sons were born in 1906, and no letters have been found after



The Athenaeum Club in 1918.
Mary is below the "x."

that date. Although her household responsibilities must have increased dramatically, Mary seems to have been firmly committed to her participation in the club. As the 1910 *Club Women of New York* directory indicated, Mary Wingeback took on a leadership role and became the club's president. In the 1920–1921 directory, she is still listed as a member, showing that she remained in the club for at least sixteen years, despite raising three children. She must have found the club deeply nourishing.

In 1914, the General Federation of Women's Clubs at last endorsed the national suffrage amendment. Clubwomen lobbying for social reform had come to realize that legislators would take them more seriously if they had the vote. I like to think the Athenaeum gradually became more involved in reform efforts, as many study clubs did. By the time the Nineteenth Amendment passed in 1920, society's attitudes had changed, partly due to the clubwomen's activities. Clubs had not only extended women's social networks but also proved that women were suited to intellectual engagement. Reading papers aloud had trained women in public speaking and given them confidence. These developments contributed to the new academic, political, and business opportunities available to middle-class women, making the clubs themselves largely obsolete. The national Federation still exists, with about 100,000 women belonging to 3,000 clubs, most of them focused on public service.

While the suffrage movement changed women's legal status, women's clubs transformed a broad range of women into citizens who could fill professional and political roles on a large scale. As I look at modern society and reflect on all the opportunities I've had as a journalist, and the increasing number of women serving in Congress and running for president, I'm grateful to my great-grandmother for contributing to changes that have shaped my life and my society. ♦



Did your ancestor belong to a women's club?

After two prominent clubs sprang up in 1868—Sorosis in New York City and the New England Women's Club in Boston—the movement spread rapidly to cities and towns across the country. The clubs were primarily white and middle-class, but a few clubs were formed for black women, and some groups were organized by professionals or wealthy women. The following sources offer information on women's clubs. Historical societies may also hold books and papers related to local women's clubs.

PRINT BOOKS: These texts offer many examples of women's clubs from across the nation. The books are available from Amazon.com or through used book dealers such as Alibris.com.

Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868–1914* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980).

Theodora Penny Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices: Women's Study Clubs, 1860–1910* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

ONLINE RESOURCES: Search these books and others like them for the names of ancestors.

Caroline French Benton, *Woman's Club Work and Programs* (Boston: Dana Estes and Company, 1913). On Archive.org.

Jane Cunningham Croly, *The History of the Woman's Club Movement in America* (Rockford, Ill.: H. G. Allen & Company, 1898). On Google Books.

Biennial of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, Official Proceedings. Search Google Books for these fascinating accounts of conferences, with names of delegates.

Club Women of New York. For New York City residents. See Google Books for various editions of these annual directories.

The Register of Women's Clubs. Search Google Books for various editions of this directory listing clubs across the country and their officers.

Above: Southbridge Woman's Club Float in 1916 Centennial Parade. Photographic Collection of the Jacob Edwards Library, Southbridge, Massachusetts.