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Harriett M. Bartlett
1897 - 1987

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Founder of the Harriett M. Bartlett Fund in
The New York Community Trust
909 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022
In 1908 aboard a steamer headed for England, a Boston doctor walked the deck. To pass the time he played a game in his head, asking himself which of his fellow passengers he most wanted to meet. Stopping in front of a couple and their 11-year-old daughter, he said: "You are the people I would most like to know on this boat."

So it was that Dr. Richard C. Cabot, noted physician, professor at the Harvard Medical School and member of one of Boston's famous first families, met Henry and Alice Bartlett and their daughter, Harriett. The friendship was to last a lifetime, as Harriett told her oral biographer in a 1978 interview for the National Association of Social Workers, and would in a few years place Harriett center-stage in the new field of medical social work introduced by Dr. Cabot at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

Harriett Moulton Bartlett was born July 18, 1897 in Lowell, Massachusetts. Among her ancestors were a signer of the Declaration of Independence, Josiah Bartlett; a signer of the Constitution and President of the Continental Congress, Nathaniel Gorham; and a noted 19th-century teacher and physician, Dr. Elisha Bartlett.

Harriett's mother, Alice, was the daughter of Oliver Moulton, a mill superintendent in a town famous for its textile mills. Her father, Henry, was the son of Charles Edward Adams Bartlett, president of the Boston & Lowell Railroad. After graduating from Harvard with a degree in mechanical engineering, Henry followed his father into railroading and eventually became head of rolling stock at this small well-run road known for its superior locomotives. During World War I, Henry sat on a committee to standardize locomotives throughout the U.S.

Early Years

Harriett Bartlett spent her first ten years in the third story of her grandfather's comfortable house with her parents and brother, Moulton.

This pleasant decade came to an abrupt end in 1907 with a tragedy that affected Harriett for the rest of her life. Her brother Moulton, who was then 13 years old, died of pneumonia while at camp in Maine. This untimely death, Harriett was to recall later, "brought my parents and me closer together." In fact, except for short periods, Harriett who never married lived with her parents until their death.

A month after young Moulton's death, Grandfather Moulton died and the Bartletts left Lowell for Cambridge. To take their mind from recent sadness, Alice Bartlett decided that they should all go to Europe with her sister's family. Harriett recalled, "It was
my first grand tour — very Victorian — in one of those slow steamers."

It was on this trip that the Bartletts met Dr. Cabot — or rather Dr. Cabot met Alice Bartlett. After the voyage, Harriett remembers, "Mother who was a sparkling person took to correspond- ing with Dr. Cabot. They both wrote charming letters. Mother couldn't spell and he was a perfectionist and they always had great fun over that."

On returning to Cambridge, Harriett, who was growing rapidly and would soon reach six feet one inch, entered the fifth grade at the Bucking- ham School, now Buckingham, Brown and Nichols School. Here she discovered she was an intellectual.

"This was quite a change and an exciting experience for me. I suddenly found myself in class with the daughters of Harvard professors. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's granddaughter was in my class. Another girl, Grace Richards was the daughter of a Nobel prize winner in Chemistry. Grace married a leading chemist, James Bryant Conant, who was president of Harvard from 1933 to 1953.

"Coming from a mill city, I was somewhat overawed at first. I wondered if I could keep up with such an illustrious group. But I was accepted readily by my classmates." Buckingham ended at the ninth grade, but the members of Harriett's class remained close. For many years, eight of these bright young women calling themselves a "Club" would meet every two weeks throughout the winter months. A member who had been away would immediately announce that she was back in Cambridge, and a special meeting would be called.

After Buckingham, Harriett prepared for college at The May School in Boston. She entered Vassar in 1914 and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1918.

Career Beginnings

Her college years spanned the First World War and like many young ladies in those days she wished to help the war effort. With this in mind in the last year of college she took a Red Cross Home Service Course which she told her oral historian later would turn out to "point to choice of career": social work.

To receive a certificate from the Association of Charities she was required to do fieldwork. She arranged to do so in Cambridge the summer she graduated.

"I remember very vividly those first home visits. And particularly one with an Italian family. I was trying earnestly to follow the instructions for an interview when the lady and her neighbors were all talking loudly in the Italian manner. And I felt I wasn't getting very far. But I did carry with me the impression of a different cultural group that stayed right by me. It was as if the experience said 'Volunteer.'"

And volunteer Harriett did, but not before she spent a year in England with her parents, her father working in the office of one of the railroad men he had known back home. Harriett studied at the London School of Economics and received a Social Science Certificate in 1920.

When the family returned to Cambridge,
Harriett learned from her mother — who still corresponded with Dr. Cabot — that "Dr. Cabot was doing interesting things at Mass General." As director of the outpatient clinic, Cabot noted that certain patients returned again and again for treatment. He began to wonder how much their environment was responsible for their continued ill health. He invited Ida Cannon, a public health nurse, to head up the Social Work Department to see if together they could come up with a better program to help the patients.

As early as 1913 concerned citizens were aware that social problems often stood in the way of a patient’s recovery, but Dr. Cabot and Ida Cannon were among the first to attack the problem, using a team approach with doctors, nurses and social workers each playing a part.

Work at Mass General

Harriett was interested and went to see Dr. Cabot who sent her to Ida Cannon. As Harriett reports it, Ida Cannon "did just what Dr. Cabot had done with her. She said, 'Why don’t you come and volunteer with us?' And that’s how I came to the famous corner with the white curtains in Mass General where Dr. Cabot placed his first social workers.

"I began work with two of my friends, Theodora Soule and Ruth Lewis, who had been there ahead of me. We used to lift up the curtains when our supervisor was busy and say to the nearest one, ‘Hey, what would you do about this?’ if we needed a little advice.

"I remember sitting there while a patient would be weeping and disturbed and gradually as I listened I would see some confidence coming back. I learned that there was something about being with a person and listening that was supportive ... and I began to feel what social work even with its limited training then could offer."

Although Mass General’s wasn’t the first medical social work department, it steadily and clearly became a model for the world. The brilliant, somewhat dominating Dr. Cabot insisted that all work be evaluated. What worked? What didn’t? Ida Cannon was patient and steady. They were friends and had a wide group of family connections. They knew people and doctors in different major hospitals around the world. Ms. Cannon knew the social workers in London. Dr. Cabot knew the doctors in Paris. Both met with U.S. social service departments as they developed around the country. Dr. Cabot often supported the work with personal funds, something that Harriett herself would do later.

Harriett was employed in the social service department of Mass General as caseworker, supervisor and educational consultant for over 20 years (1921–42).

Contributions to Medical Social Work

In the whirlwind of activity at Mass General, Harriett noted that social workers learned mostly by doing, as there were almost no books to teach this new profession. This fact concerned the intellectual Harriett, who already was showing a well-organized mind that delighted in conceptualizing.

She herself continued to want and seek more training and knowledge as a professional person. In 1927 she received an M.A. in Sociology from the University of Chicago.

Having recently joined the American Asso-
ciation of Medical Social Workers, she began writing to satisfy committee work requirements, but she soon sought more writing opportunities. She found that she wanted to give scholarly attention and order to the scattered field of social work practice. "We need our own body of knowledge to stand on to be more effective," Harriett preached. Her goal was to change the **art** of social work into the **science** of social work.

Thus Miss Bartlett was instrumental in transforming social work into a profession primarily through her interest in developing knowledge and theory about what social workers do. Ultimately, Harriett Bartlett wrote 6 books, 40 articles and 1 monograph on the practice of medical social work. Her most important contribution was her book, *The Common Base of Social Work Practice*. This classic text furthers the working definition of social work and identifies the distinctive elements of social work practice. It has been translated into many languages, including Japanese.

In 1947, because her parents were aging, Harriett took an apartment near theirs in a building overlooking the Charles River in Cambridge.

Almost as soon as she arrived, the dean of Simmons College in Boston called her in and asked her to recommend someone to teach at the School of Social Work.

"I started to recommend names and then the dean said would I come myself. I had been wondering what to do because by this time my parents had become quite elderly and I thought it would be better if I were nearby. And I thought maybe I might take on this teaching."

Harriett started at Simmons as an associate professor. She later became director of medical social work. She retired in 1957 to more actively pursue a program of writing, study and research. In 1981, in keeping with her lifelong commitment to practice and research, she funded the Harriett M. Bartlett Practice Effectiveness Project under the auspices of the National Association of Social Workers. A basic objective of the project was to establish a national clearinghouse for practice studies on social work practice.

Harriett Bartlett's work earned her many professional awards, including two honorary degrees: Doctor of Humane Letters from Boston University in 1969 and Doctor of Social Science from Simmons College in 1976. The NASW Board of Directors presented her with an award "in recognition of her many years of devotion and service in helping to shape the destiny of the social work profession, her dedication to the National Association of Social Workers, and especially for her extraordinary efforts in the clarification of social work practice."

**An Avid Naturalist and Reader**

Although medical social work was Harriett's driving passion, she did manage to retreat each year for a month to her summer home at Mirror Lake in New Hampshire. She had summered in the area almost every year since college, and in the 1940s bought a place of her own. A naturalist, she loved the woods, the water, the birds — and books.
Throughout the year she would read the New York Times Book Review section, clipping out reviews of books which interested her. She’d order 30 or more and have them sent to her summer cottage. Some books were technical, some were about nature and the rest were about English country houses and the people who lived in them in the last century, a period Harriett loved. Her habit was to read several books at once, and she had places outdoors where she’d read at particular times of the day. She even designated what type of book she’d read at various spots.

She was also an avid walker. Until she was 80 her tall majestic carriage was eye-catching as she strode the streets of Cambridge. When she was younger and her parents were still alive, the three of them would often go for moonlight walks around Cambridge. Once they even walked from Cambridge to a wedding in Brookline, an occurrence that surprised the wedding guests, according to Harriett.

The older she grew the more Harriett resembled Eleanor Roosevelt, a case of mistaken identity that secretly pleased her.

Harriett Bartlett received an honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters, from Boston University in 1969.


How Harriett felt about her life can best be summed up in a note she wrote to her cousins in 1947 to be delivered by her lawyer in the event of her death:

If anything should happen on any of my travels to snatch me suddenly out of this life I want to say that I feel that I have had a good life. I’ve been blessed with interesting experiences in work and in play and the warm affection of family and friends. I believe that I’ve been able to contribute a little something worthwhile to social effort in my time and it has been worthwhile for me too. I am not afraid to go and I hope that those who love me will rejoice over all the happiness that we have had together and not grieve over the lost.

With all my love,

Harriett

Harriett M. Bartlett died in 1987 at the age of
89, but her contributions to social work continues. She left a fund and a plan. "It is my dream that the profession of social work sometime will reach a point of maturity when it will be interested and able to establish a center for advanced study at some university to develop social work knowledge and theory to improve social work education and practice."

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