

LAURA DE FORCE GORDON:

FRAGMENTS OF A FEMINIST PIONEER

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INTRODUCTION: SCOPE OF THIS BIOGRAPHY

Without a doubt, Laura de Force Gordon was a feminist in every sense of the word. In addition to travelling to California in a covered wagon, she was also a pioneer in every sense of the word. Even so, to say that Laura de Force Gordon was a pioneering feminist seems to only caricaturize her, because her complexity transcends that label.

Born in Pennsylvania, Laura de Force Gordon migrated to the West Coast just after the United States Civil War, eventually settling in California's San Joaquin Valley. Immediately upon her arrival, she shook up the young state by delivering its first public lecture calling for woman suffrage. From that moment on, she shaped the campaign for suffrage in the West. Certainly, she was not the only pioneering woman in California leading the fight for the "good cause." Indeed, many other women and men contributed in key fashion to the spirited, if unsuccessful, struggle for the women's vote. However, Laura possessed such intellect, eloquence and imagination that she enjoyed an unusually powerful and influential position within the movement. Truly, she was so dynamic and determined an advocate for women's equality that it is difficult to imagine the public debate in California without her voice.

Laura's talents and persuasiveness commanded such attention that others often sought her collaboration and advocacy in their causes which were wholly separate from woman suffrage. Indeed, her dogged determination and seemingly boundless energy propelled her into several other professions. Her skills in public lecturing and persuasion made her a natural and effective lobbyist before the state legislature. Her powers of observation and insight, along with a keen command of the language, created a feisty journalist and newspaper editor. Her law practice thrived under the combined power of her cool logical analysis and heated passion for justice. Her interest in agriculture not only made her San Joaquin Valley estate profitable, but advanced the silk industry in the United States.

While Laura's achievements would be laudable in any circumstance, they assume special respect when it is remembered that Laura accomplished them when the cult of domesticity confined most women to their homes, in quest for the longingly desired but mostly elusive woman's sphere. Of the small number of women who dared to participate in public affairs, the majority of them only

worked on behalf of causes thought to be fit for women, such as temperance or women's clubs. Against this canvas, the portrait of Laura seems at least anachronistic, if not wholly alien.

Laura was not completely alone on her path, however. Most of her pioneering strides were matched or even preceded by another brave woman or two. Even though she delivered the first woman suffrage speech in California, she was not among the most famous of suffragists nationally, nor was she even the first president of the state suffrage organization. Even though she was the first woman to publish a daily newspaper, perhaps in the world, many other women had previously established sound reputations as journalists and editors of influential periodicals. Even though Laura was an uniquely compelling lecturer for the Christian Spiritualists, she was not the most notorious. And even though the rustle of her skirts rippled through the male dominance of the legal profession, she was not the first woman lawyer in the state.

However, the potent combination of her achievements and endeavors produced one of the most compelling women in California history. Sadly, her story is yet to be told cohesively. Instead, she is remembered only in subordinate clauses or footnotes to the tributes of other more prominent figures. Her story lies in fragments. Primary sources are scattered everywhere, without indices. Now, I begin to collate the many fragments of the memory of Laura de Force Gordon, with the aim of adding relief, complexity and respect to the sketches and caricatures that currently exist.

Given the short time frame during this initial phase of the project, I attempt to accomplish the following. The body of this draft presents the facts that I know now about her life, organized by each identity that she carried. In the footnotes, I annotate any apparent discrepancies that exist. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, I discuss questions that the sources raise, and offer ideas for further research that might answer those questions. In the conclusion, I propose ways of thinking and researching about Laura de Force Gordon that might satisfactorily reassemble the many fragments about her public and private life. The bibliography consolidates all of the sources that I either personally consulted or believe may contain fruitful information.

Unfortunately, many biographical gaps still exist, and more questions about Laura's character and motivations linger than perhaps are answered. And even if all of the extant sources could be gathered together, a complete illustration of Laura may still be just beyond reach. However, the very spirit of Laura would expect no less of us than to call up our own powers of passion and imagination to supplement what is available. She believed that "the greatest of all mysteries is that of life. Oh, what a limitless field for research, speculation and wonder."¹ So, this is a humble attempt to broach the mystery of the life of an undoubtedly phenomenal but perplexing woman, and to encourage you to research, speculate and wonder about Laura de Force Gordon along with me.

I. GROWING UP

Laura de Force materialized on this world on August 17, 1838 in North East, Erie County, Pennsylvania. She was one of nine children born to Abram de Force and Catherine Doolittle Allen, although it is unclear where in the birth order Laura emerged. Apparently, the family possessed no visible financial reserves, and lived a rather stable if thrifty existence until after the United States Civil War. Catherine was herself one of nine children and born in 1804 near Lake Erie, her most notable predecessor being a grandfather Hazeltine who served as a lieutenant under General George Washington in the War for Independence. Abram's heritage is mostly a mystery, other than the fact that his gravestone marks his birth date as 1803. The marriage of Catherine, or Katy as her friends called her, to Abram in 1826 produced nine children of German, French and English descent.²

Even though Katy and Abram were sufficiently healthy and prosperous to produce nine children who all lived at least until adulthood, Abram himself suffered from rheumatism which disabled him for at least eleven years. During that time, Katy supported the family mostly through fine lace and needlework. When her eyes became dim, she switched to quilt and rug-making. So fervently did she work that her children later lamented Katy's lack of time to develop her natural intellectual ability. Under other circumstances, she may well have been "one of the great representative literary women of [that] generation, had the much desired avenues of learning opened up to her youthful feet."³ Instead, she devoted her life and strength to caring for her children and husband. However, her love of learning evidently flowed fully to her children, and all of boys and girls alike received a solid education. Laura attended public schools in both Erie County and in Chautauqua County, New York, developing a notable literary and oratorical talent.⁴

Little else has yet been unearthed about Laura's youth. She was certainly not the oldest child nor the youngest. However, having been born twelve years after her parents' marriage, it might be safe to deduce that she was one of the younger children, thereby escaping many of household responsibilities that elder sisters usually donned. However, birth order alone cannot explain Laura's access to formal education. Despite living in apparently rural conditions, Laura received enough education to render her an excellent writer and speaker. Moreover, her sister Gertrude also exhibited the fruits of a sound education, owning and editing a regional newspaper in her adult years.

The education of at least two female children in the early nineteenth century was enough of a rarity, especially for working class families, that some other influence within the family must have positively contributed to that fact. The boasts about Katy's intelligence may be evidence of her determination that her daughters would receive a formal education. But, absent from this interpretation is any influence that Abram may have exerted. Even if he was so disabled that he could

not physically labor, he most assuredly was present at the family home.⁵ How much education had he received, and what was his role in rearing the children, both academically and spiritually? Indeed, confirming the religious beliefs and practices of either parent might help to explain why Laura would become such a commanding Spiritualist orator as a young woman.

II. SPIRITUALIST

In 1855, one of Laura's brothers died, provoking Katy's grief and subsequent reassessment of her relationship with God. Formerly a member of the Congregational Church, Katy became a devout Christian Spiritualist in that mournful year. Just how Katy became acquainted with Spiritualism, however, is unclear. Somehow, from that moment forward, Katy, Abram, Laura and at least some (if not all) of Laura's siblings accepted the Spiritualist faith.⁶ Whatever the source, the family's collective embrace of Spiritualism surely explains Laura's precocious appearance on the lecture circuit. Even though Laura exhibited uncanny intellectual powers as a child, the Spiritualist movement was a welcoming vehicle for Laura's oratorical prowess. Laura became a regular public speaker on the East Coast, delivering the Spiritualists' trademark trance-induced lectures as early as age fifteen.

The Spiritualists believed that the souls of the deceased communicated from the afterworld to those still living on Earth, so that the living may learn the lessons and wisdom from all eternity. Like many of the fervent religious movements of the nineteenth century, the Spiritualists hosted public lectures to educate people about their beliefs. However, unlike most other religions, save for some of the experimental utopian societies, the Spiritualists espoused a uniquely egalitarian message. Shunning traditional religious authority, the Spiritualists emphasized freedom of conscience and direct inspiration. From this view, it naturally followed that the Spiritualists advocated political reform which cast aside socially constructed authority, such as male dominance. Indeed, the Spiritualist ideology of human autonomy fully encompassed the belief of strict social, political and sexual equality between men and women.

Historians have now come to believe that the Spiritualist movement was largely responsible for the timing of the woman suffrage movement, at least in California. Agitation for women's rights first surfaced in the editorial pages of newspapers. Most periodicals were hostile to both woman suffrage and suffrage, such as the Sacramento Bee, which deplored the women's rights doctrine, along with the "unsexing" of women, as a natural result of Spiritualism. Similarly, because the Spiritualists communicated the wisdom of the dead through trance-induced speeches, papers like the San Francisco Bulletin spent fifteen years trying to link Spiritualism with clinical insanity.

However, several periodicals became ardent supporters and actively promoted the cause whenever possible. Aside from a number of fledgling Spiritualist

publications, the San Jose Mercury exemplified the few mainstream newspapers that were friends to both the Spiritualists and the woman suffragists. Nevertheless, advocates of woman suffrage knew that written editorials had only limited power to affect social change, and planned a more vocal appeal for "the Good Cause."

For example, the key impetus for Laura's first trip to California was an invitation in 1866 extended by the Friends of Progress, a Spiritualist association in San Francisco. Nationally renowned for her inspirational Spiritualist lectures and trance-induced speeches,⁷ Laura had also argued eloquently for women's equality. The Spiritualists in California knew that an orator with such "fine personal magnetism" and "Websterian in force and existence" could be the energizing spirit of the women suffrage movement.⁸

Accepting the invitation, Laura embarked upon her first trip to California in 1867, stopping in Denver, Salt Lake City and Virginia City to share her beliefs in Spiritualism and women's equality. Her presentations won praise from local journalists. Moreover, her eloquence and wisdom was sufficiently compelling to command crowded assemblies every day for a week in a single locale. Laura appeared publicly on the West Coast for the first time on December 24, 1867, speaking on Spiritualism and other important political questions.

Laura's first public call for woman suffrage in California, however, rang out from Platt's Hall in San Francisco on February 18, 1868 in a speech entitled, "The Elective Franchise: Who Shall Vote?" This date marked the first public speech on the issue to be heard anywhere in California. According to newspaper accounts, Laura attracted a respectably large audience which applauded the intellectual basis for her message. Notably, certain members of the audience would become the future organizers of the Golden State's first suffrage societies. Even so, the radical nature of the mere notion of women suffrage can be heard in a newspaper report which claimed that Laura was "a pleasing speaker, but her doctrines don't suit these orthodox times just yet."⁹ Nevertheless, Laura ignited the spark for women suffrage in the West.

Interestingly, Laura's speech for woman suffrage was not officially sponsored by the Spiritualists or Friends of Progress. Indeed, because some prominent newspapers had already condemned the radical Spiritualists for instigating the women's rights movement, suffragists were well-advised to sever any overt ties with the Spiritualists, if they hoped to garner legitimacy for their political cause. Even though Laura's reputation as a Spiritualist preceded her historic speech from Platt's Hall, afterwards Laura became a well known speaker solely on the issues of women's equality, and little more was ever documented of her subsequent Spiritualist activities, if any.

Despite the fact that Laura ceased publicly espousing Spiritualism, she and her family continued their faith privately. Laura's mother always carried a firm and

unwavering faith of an immortal life. In 1883, both of Laura's parents died within a short span of each other. When Abram passed away first in June, Katy said aloud that his wait for her would be brief, until she was likewise freed from her mortal life. So strong was the family's belief in Spiritualism that, upon Katy's death in December, they called for Addie Ballou, a Spiritualist minister from San Francisco, to attend the grieving family. Upon their mother's death, Laura's sister Gertie hoped that the grief felt by the surviving children and grandchildren would be assuaged by the knowledge that they too would one day would pass to the "land of immortal life, where tears and anguish and death will be unknown forever."¹⁰ By contrast, when Laura's brother, John Hazeltine de Force, died only one week after their mother, he was buried by a Methodist minister, despite John's Spiritualist beliefs, in deference to his wife who did not accept the teachings of Spiritualism.

That Laura stopped delivering Spiritualist lectures altogether, after her emergence as a public advocate for woman suffrage, was probably more of a tactical or pragmatic maneuver than of any diminished belief in the faith. Indeed, she may also have publicly watered down her private adherence to Spiritualism, since one cyclopedic reference to Laura written shortly after her death describes her an "agnostic in religion, with leanings toward Theosophy."¹¹ Yet, she continued to believe in the "vast forever" of immortal life, even until the end of her mortal life.¹²

Most significantly, Laura's early immersion in the dogma and practices of Spiritualism clearly exposed her to the political and social critique that formed the foundation of her feminist beliefs and advocacy. The fundamental tenet of pure equality that informs the Spiritualist view would resurface repeatedly in Laura's particular brand of feminism. Laura's Platt Hall speech revealed her belief in strict equality, when she proclaimed: "Let the Constitutions of the several States be amended, so that white and black, red and yellow, of both sexes, can exercise their civil rights."¹³ Even at the turn of the twentieth century, when the newest generation of suffragists had drifted away from such absolute equality-based arguments, preferring a protectionist rationale for the woman's vote, Laura was still asserting that the "spirit of divine unrest" provoked "thousands of women everywhere in[to] open organized rebellion against the social and political despotism which denies woman the right to choose her own vocation, or those who should rule over her."¹⁴

Moreover, by becoming a trance-speaker at such a young age within the Spiritualist tradition, she was well-trained to deliver hundreds of public lectures stumping for woman suffrage. Not only did the experience refine her elocution, her travels as a young woman on behalf of the Spiritualists prepared her for the exhausting and lonely trails that she would travel from town to coastal town in the Pacific Northwest, gathering supporters for the woman's vote.

Further research into Laura's Spiritualism, including the text of any speeches she delivered, and her participation in Spiritualist congregations throughout her adult life, may provide added insight into the roots and evolution of Laura's political and personal beliefs. While the crucial relationship between Laura's spiritual and political beliefs is clear, a more textured illustration might emerge, providing even more insight into Laura's motivations and desires.

III. SUFFRAGIST & LOBBYIST

Laura did not become an indefatigable suffrage activist until two years after her famous Platt's Hall speech. First, she returned to Treasure City, Nevada, where her husband Charles had contracted a near-fatal case of pneumonia while futilely searching for his fortunes in minerals. After Charles recovered, Laura and he decided to relocate to the more temperate climate of the San Joaquin Central Valley. By the fall of 1869, the Gordons were back in California; Charles opened up a medical practice in Mokelumme, and Laura immediately resumed her advocacy work for suffrage.¹⁵ In January 1870, Laura attended the first organized meeting of women suffragists in the state. Indeed, several women in attendance at Laura's 1868 speech were instrumental in founding the California State Woman Suffrage Society (CSWSS), including Elizabeth Schenck and Emily Pitts Stevens.¹⁶

At that first statewide meeting, the woman suffragists attempted to articulate their organizational structure and goals. The internal division that would continually hamper the women's movement in the decades to come were apparent from the beginning. Our Laura was apparently in the middle of the nascent division.

First of all, the women attempted to resolve the degree to which all of the attendees could participate in the founding discussions and decisions. Some leaders preferred to adopt a traditional convention structure, controlling the number of delegates from each region as well as the interrelationship between local suffrage societies within the state. However, Laura called for the "greatest liberality ... in admitting persons to the right to speak and vote; that all who signed the roll, paid the fee, and expressed themselves in sympathy with the movement, should be admitted."¹⁷ Eventually, Laura's views prevailed, and 120 women thus founded the official woman suffrage movement in California.

Laura's outspokenness further shaped the nature of the proceedings at that two-day convention. Laura complained verbally that, at first, most of the women sat timidly. Laura then cajoled them into action, exhorting that "ladies must not sit like mummies, but open their mouths and vote audibly."¹⁸ Again, Laura's prods were heeded, and the rest of the meeting was filled with vocal demonstrations of multiple opinions.

Not all of Laura's opinions were accepted, however. Laura was not elected to a leadership position at that first meeting. Laura later referred derogatorily to the

women who were elected as the "Board of Controll." Moreover, while the exact nature of the dissension is murky, it was sufficient for Laura to declare just one week following the meeting that she would not officially work under the auspice of any organized societies for the time being, deeming it best for all concerned.¹⁹ Laura apparently believed that the local and national suffragists were attempting to undermine her leadership. Moreover, personality conflicts were, as always, abundant.²⁰

Yet, even if she shunned any attachment to a leadership structure, Laura quickly became the suffragists' most prominent local advocate. For the next two years, Laura travelled incessantly along the Pacific Coast, delivering an estimated two hundred speeches to anyone who would listen to her call for women's equality and civil rights. While she concentrated on gathering signatures for petition in California, she also spoke in Oregon, Nevada, and Washington Territory.

Always a superior strategist, Laura never let an opportunity lapse that might further the cause. For instance, when she was nominated by the San Joaquin Independent Party as its candidate for the California State Senate in 1871, she used her campaign trail as a platform from which to deliver her feminist message. Likewise, she employed her well-oiled powers of persuasion and organization to found the Nevada State Woman Suffrage Association in 1870, convening its first convention in Battle Mountain, Nevada. That effort culminated with her presentation of a proposed constitutional amendment for woman suffrage to the Nevada state legislature, a bill that lost by merely one vote. Back in California, Laura collaborated with fellow suffragist Ellen C. Sargent as members of the "National Woman Suffrage and Educational Committee" whose goal to ask the United States Congress to pass a Declaratory Act so that women would vote for the next president.

Despite working alone for much of these first two years, Laura never failed to assist the organized suffrage movement when asked. Susan B. Anthony felt indebted to Laura's success in soliciting subscriptions to Anthony's national periodical, *The Revolution*.²¹ Likewise, Clara Shortridge Foltz was not disappointed when she invited Laura to contribute her skills to Clara's effort to hold the state's first official suffrage convention.²² Naturally, Laura also presented the first political appeal for woman suffrage to the California State Legislature in 1870, leading a delegation of three women who represented over three thousand petitioners from around the state.²³ Despite the fact that the Senate turned a deaf ear to the issue of suffrage, Laura won individual praise for her knowledge of constitutional law and legal issues.

By the following biennial state legislative session, Laura and the other suffragists were more prepared. They drafted a total of eight legislative bills, adding specific marital, economic, and property rights to their demands for woman suffrage. Again, the efforts failed, but paved the way for the passage of a bill in the next legislative session. In 1874, the woman's suffragists, led by the Laura's astute

lobbying efforts, secured the right to run for certain educational offices. Ironically, even though women could now hold a limited number of elected positions, not only were women still barred from political office, they were still barred from the ballot box.

Laura's determined struggle for the women's vote in California continued in similar fashion for the rest of the century. Throughout the next twenty-five years, Laura and the others continued to press for women suffrage. Laura eventually rejoined the organized effort by serving as the president of the California State Women Suffrage Society from 1884 to 1894, following the tenure of her friend and co-advocate, Clara Shortridge Foltz. In some years, the suffrage effort was not as strong as in others, owing to the waxing and waning of the collective motivation and energy. For instance, after women in Colorado earned the vote in 1893, renewed vigor poured into the California effort, leading to an exciting, but still unsuccessful, legislative campaign in 1896.²⁴ Throughout the duration, Laura remained involved, serving alternately as lobbyist, organizer, advisor, or any other role that the cause needed. She often observed that she was so committed to the cause that her primary business often suffered in the wake of her activism.

While working on the interminable campaign for the vote, suffragists were smart to seize key opportunities to push through other state legislation which might advance the civil rights of women. Surprisingly perhaps, the women won almost every suggestion they proffered, save that of the women's vote. Indeed, Laura's lobbying skills were uncanny, and those skills figured prominently in the successes that women did achieve in those years. For instance, when the Ladies' Silk Culture Society of California sought legislative support for the fledgling silk industry and their proposed Filature (or silk reeling) school, they called upon Laura to steer their request through the legislature. Even though there were but three days remaining in the 1883 legislative session, Laura successfully brokered the bill, winning the governor's signature just one hour before the close of the session. Laura's talent secured \$7500 in appropriations for the school, plus established the State Board of Silk Culture, a majority of which were statutorily required to be women.

Through the years, Laura and her colleagues repeatedly presented other bills that sought to release women from their subordinated status. For example, in 1889, Laura prepared three petitions asking for both municipal and school suffrage, as well as the right to hold all educational office. Those bills were favored by a majority of the legislature, but failed to carry by the requisite two-thirds majority. Again in 1891, Laura pushed four bills through the legislature, seeing the passage of those regarding notaries, probate and property rights, but again lamenting the demise of the suffrage bill.²⁵ Additionally, Laura frequently submitted oral and written briefs to the state legislature on issues germane to the women's cause.²⁶ Moreover, the elusive quest for woman suffrage should not overshadow the unprecedented achievement when Laura and Clara Shortridge Foltz secured the right for every California woman to enjoy the profession or

education of her choice in 1879.²⁷ Known as "The Women's Lawyer Bill, " they rose above the acrimonious debate to usher in a constitutional amendment securing the right for women to pursue, among other things, careers in the law.²⁸

Other than direct lobbying, Laura maneuvered to exert influence from other vantage points as well. In 1878, she ran for the position of delegate to the state Constitutional Convention. Even though she lost, she was still able to monitor the deliberations, voice her opinion, and urge the suffrage plank in her alternate role as a newspaper correspondent in attendance.

The road chosen by Laura was not a glorious one. To appear time and again before the legislature required fortitude to withstand the inevitable taunts by men who ridiculed the woman suffragists. While politicians and citizens alike looked forward to public debates on the suffrage issue, it was not always for noble reasons. As the Sacramento Bee reported, elaborate preparations were being made for the 1880 Assembly debates on school suffrage, and the paper predicted "a feast of reason and flow of wisdom " on the subject. The paper was also careful to note that "everybody in the Assembly seems to be hard at work on some burlesque speech, motion, resolution or point of order," including a "protest contain[ing] the names of all the convicts in the State Prison."²⁹ It was likewise regularly reported when a certain assemblyman presented a "characteristically humorous speech in opposition" to suffrage proposals.³⁰ Even years after Laura's death, following the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution, C. K. McClatchy, a noted Sacramento journalist, recounted the harsh environment into which Laura forged:

"In those days, California journalism was not very respectful to aspiring suffragists, and Laura DeForce-Pump Gordon was about the least offensive of the names showered upon her by the 'male brutes' of the press. But Mrs. Gordon went her way, not bothering her head about the variegated verbal vegetables that were hurled at her--she possessed self-poise as well as plenty of courage--and she soon so won the admiration even of her contemners [sic] that one by one they gradually came to write and speak of her with respect."³¹

As always, adverse social and political winds seemed to deflect off of the public Laura de Force Gordon. Yet, further research could hopefully reveal how the private Laura felt about such opposition. By locating and then deconstructing her speeches, articles and oral briefs, we might be able to understand how a woman in Laura's position could withstand such continual public battering and rejection. Surely, the legislative wins that she did secure must have rejuvenated her confidence and spirit. Her powers of persuasion were renowned, and her repeated failure to push the suffrage bills through the legislature say less about her lobbying abilities and more about the deeply-held public opposition to woman suffrage. Yet, the national movement for woman suffrage was not faring any better than that in California, and the isolated wins in scattered western states must have seemed to her more an anomaly than a trend.

Nevertheless, Laura's belief in woman suffrage, together with her faith that it would soon come to fruition, perhaps served as the most common thread that held her peripatetic life together. Even after a quarter century of suffrage work, Laura seemed only minimally disturbed about whether the suffrage amendment be ratified at the 1895 election or not, instead rejoicing in the increased numbers of men and women who actually did support woman suffrage and seeing in that fact that political freedom was near, if not imminent.³²

To be sure, even though women's suffrage remained Laura's primary quest, she was far from a single-issue politician. Her intellect and philosophical beliefs reveal a sophisticated feminist's understanding of hierarchy, patriarchy, and oppression, if not an idealistic notion of equality. Likewise, she was acutely attuned to the myriad social, religious and economic mechanisms that collaborated in the oppression of women through six thousand years of the civilized world.³³ It would be interesting to learn why she focused primarily on suffrage rather than, say, property or probate rights. Most contemporary historical analyses of the nineteenth conclude that woman's suffrage was indeed the most significant political issue that women could have pursued. However, it would be enlightening to understand how a woman with Laura's intelligence and abilities attempted to gauge the likelihood of success of a particular personal or professional mission, as well as the extent to which she would pursue it.

Additionally, the manner in which Laura approached her suffrage work is curiously fascinating. On one hand, Laura's letters portray a woman who worked largely on her own. At times, Laura deliberately operated independently of the official suffrage organizations. Yet, even at her most distant, she worked in loose collaboration or affinity with the goals and strategies with those associations. At other times, she was very well synchronized with the formal organizations, even serving as the president of the state society for a decade. Sometimes it is difficult to discern whether a particular speech or campaign trip was either sanctioned by an organization, or if was instead a personally motivated activity. To be sure, the number of active woman suffragists was small, so Laura's activities in any context could appear to be those of an isolated individual.³⁴ Also, Laura the Vigilant turned each slightest opportunity into a chance to advocate for the woman's vote, which meant that much of her suffrage work occurred spontaneously and outside of the planned events of the collective movement. Yet, because of Laura's early willingness to shirk the formality of organizational support, one wonders whether her later solitary travels on behalf of the cause were the result of a preference on Laura's part to act quasi-independently. In short, Laura's pattern suggests that she preferred to work alone rather than as part of a team.

Even if it were true that Laura preferred to make her own agenda, her intentions could have only been for the greater good. For instance, if her fundraising efforts for her suffrage work faltered below the requisite amount, she did not set aside her duty to the cause. Indeed, money for woman suffrage societies was scarce,

and Laura's unwavering dedication to the cause, even when she had to supplement the movement's coffers with her own resources, did not go unnoticed. A selfish person would not have subordinated a successful professional career to the extent that Laura did, especially after fighting for a quarter of a century to no avail.³⁵

IV. JOURNALIST

While the suffragists' letters prove that the cause was never sufficiently funded, it is less clear how Laura supported herself in early adulthood. She did receive earnings from her Spiritualist lectures, but how much she saved from those efforts is unknown. For our purposes here, we do not know whether she had to seek gainful employment out of necessity or due to her personal desire to pursue a career. Which ever the cause, Laura wasted little time after the first two dizzying years of the suffrage campaign had passed.

In the summer of 1873, Laura embarked upon a career in journalism, pursuing what some friends called her lifelong ambition.³⁶ Having settled in San Joaquin County where her husband was practicing medicine, Laura was first hired by The Narrow Gauge to write and edit the women's department. The Narrow Gauge was a struggling semi-weekly edited by William Glenn, who some viewed as less interested in quality journalism and more interested in selling papers. If Glenn's plan in hiring Laura was to capitalize off of the novelty of a notorious woman suffragist as a reporter, his business sense misled him, and the paper closed shortly thereafter.

However, the journalism bug had infected Laura. After all, many regional papers failed to create a niche in young California, where its communities and politics were still anything except established. Laura first seized on the opportunity to buy the printing material of the Stocktonian, a paper which was sold the for execution of a debt. By September 22, 1873, Laura published the first issue of the Stockton Weekly Leader, a semi-literary newspaper, which met with such favor by the public as to encourage Laura to publish a daily. To handle the production, she bought additional type and material from the defunct Stockton Republican, and issued the first Stockton Daily Leader on May 1, 1874. Clearly Democratic in politics, Laura's paper received favorable notice and was well-received in San Joaquin County. Aside from her journalistic contributions, Laura is credited with being the first woman in the world to publish and edit a daily newspaper.

The success of the Democratic party in the state elections of 1875 induced Laura to move her daily paper to Sacramento. However, she soon sold the Daily Leader, and the subsequent owner soon discontinued its publication altogether. But Laura was not finished with journalism. In similar fashion as before, she acquired the Oakland Daily Democrat, and published it until her exit from reporting in 1878.

Laura learned that she was ill-suited for journalism. Indeed, living the life as a female journalist in the nineteenth century in no way resembled any fantasy she may have held. While editing the Oakland paper, she described the work as "hateful," and anxiously awaited the sale of her newspaper so she could escape the "drudgery." In 1878, she called her purchase of the Oakland daily a "pecuniary loss." Another reporter claimed she had closed her paper because she was faced with "fierce prejudice against women leaving their sphere."³⁷ Even after she shed the Daily Democrat, she longed for the end of her tenure as an officer in the Pacific Coast Press Association.

As much as Laura dreaded her life as an "editress,"³⁸ she exploited her position for the suffrage movement as only Laura could. She repeatedly used her editorials as a platform to call for woman suffrage, and reported in her stories all legislative activity that helped or hindered women's rights. Additionally, after losing her campaign to become an elected delegate to the Constitutional Convention, Laura attended the Convention instead as a reporter. From that vantage point, she was able to personally monitor the status of her seminal "Women Lawyer's Bill," lobbying when necessary to ensure its passage.

Moreover, Laura's choice to leave the profession was not a simple one, as journalism ran in the family. Laura's sister Gertrude edited the Lodi Valley Review, a regional weekly that ran from 1878 to 1884. Called "the liveliest and spiciest little country sheet in the State,"³⁹ Gertie reported on an interesting array of local events. During its time, the Valley Review was the only paper in San Joaquin County printed outside of Stockton. At first, Gertie merely set the forms in Lodi, and printed the paper on presses in Stockton. But she soon bought her own press, and published the entire periodical in Lodi. Like her more famous sister, Gertie did not give up journalism immediately after selling the Valley Review; she published another local periodical called the Lodi Cyclone for two more years before folding up the presses for good.

After Laura sold the Daily Democrat, she continued as a free-lance journalist for the San Francisco Daily Evening Post, as well as the Sacramento Bee. As her career as a journalist came to close, she authored what would be her only published book. Ironically, her book had nothing to do with her exceedingly compelling intellect and political philosophy which distinguished her among her peers. Instead, she wrote a travel guide, describing for tourists the unique healing qualities of the geysers and springs in California's Napa Valley.⁴⁰ While a travel guide might seem a bit fluffy for one so sophisticated as Laura, her leisurely project is easily explained when we recall what she was working on simultaneously.

V. ATTORNEY AT LAW

While Laura was polishing up the vivid descriptions in her armchair travelogue, she was privately reading the law. Since her first appearance in 1870 before the

California Senate in front of Judge Tweed, she had received praise for her logical abilities and knowledge of constitutional law. Exactly when she decided to pursue the law is unknown, but it came as no surprise to those who knew her. The only peculiarity was that no woman had yet been admitted to the California Bar. Since Laura had already proved herself a brave and pioneering woman, willing to stand up to oppositional winds, however, it was perhaps her fate to forge this battle as well.

Luckily, in 1877, Laura found a colleague who was equally prepared for the task. Indeed, Clara Shortridge Foltz had already drafted a proposed bill which, if adopted, would guarantee a woman the right to practice law or any other profession of her choice. Friends of Clara recommended that she enlist Laura's aid, due to Laura's lobbying expertise, and Laura gladly accepted the challenge. Because Clara and Laura both desired to enter the legal profession, the bill quickly became known as the "Woman Lawyer's Bill." Despite the usual rancor that accompanied such radical legislation, the bill became a permanent part of the California Constitution in 1878.

Meanwhile, Laura and Clara applied to the Hastings College of Law in 1878, and actually attended several lectures before the admissions committee denied their applications.⁴¹ Basing their legal claims on the very constitutional amendment which Clara had drafted, the women appealed their denials separately but with keen strategy--Laura filed a petition for an original writ to the California Supreme Court, and Clara sought a writ of mandamus in the trial court. The women accurately forecast that with both suits pending, the College of Law would be less likely to manipulate them with lengthy delay.⁴² After Laura's suit was consolidated with Clara's, the women won both initially and on appeal. While the suit was pending, and in preparation for their oral arguments, Laura and Clara independently studied the law so completely that they were admitted to the bar by the California Supreme Court on December 6, 1879.⁴³

By the time the suit reached final judgement, Laura was ready to open her law practice and had no time to return to the leisure of formal education at Hastings Law College. Because Clara was similarly motivated, neither of the pioneering duo graduated from the institution that they so ably fought to open to women.⁴⁴

Within two months after being admitted to the state bar, Laura launched a law practice from a San Francisco office, excelling in criminal defense and other general practice areas. In her first notable legal challenge, Laura represented two women who had been barred from working in a San Francisco saloon under that city's "dive ordinance." That protective code provided that women should not work in places where liquor was sold. Once again, Laura argued that this limitation constituted a constitutionally impermissible bar on her clients' right to enjoy an occupation of their choice, based on Clara's 1878 amendment. While the prosecutor argued that the legislature never intended that the "Woman's Lawyer Bill" would alter public morality or sentiment regarding women's

employment in saloons or the like, Laura articulated the simple but forceful argument that the Constitution now guaranteed fundamental equality between women and men. Sensing the precedential value of the legal claim, the trial court heard Laura's argument en banc, and decided in her clients' favor by a vote of eight to two.⁴⁵

Later that same year, Laura joined the defense team for M. A. Saldes,⁴⁶ who was being prosecuted for the murder of another man. After the prosecution presented its array of witnesses, people packed the courtroom to hear a woman argue in a murder trial for the first time. Reporters seemed pleased to note that Laura tackled the challenge calmly and "with a well-thumbed but standing volume of legal lore."⁴⁷ When she rose to present the opening argument for the defense, she uttered but six words before the ensuing hubbub from the audience drowned out her voice. The bailiff spent the next thirty minutes restoring order to the tribunal, before the case could again proceed. Laura again began her argument, attacking the prosecution's case with legal logic and common sense. When the case went to the jury, they only needed thirty minutes before returning a verdict of not guilty.

Laura's subsequent criminal defense practice was marked with some similarly notable events. In 1880, she spared a California Italian from the death penalty, for which she was named an honorary member in the Royal Italian Literary Society of Rome.⁴⁸ And in 1882, she defended E. R. Sproul, who had confessed to the murder of James S. Andrews in Butte, California. The murder and its trial was one of the most notorious events in local criminal history, given that Sproul, an owner of a profitable local mine, explained that he had really intended to kill another man instead. Despite the open confession, Laura again secured a not guilty verdict for her grateful client. More surprisingly, by the time the jury received the case, the entire courtroom including the district attorney were "imbued with idea that the defendant was not the really guilty one in the tragedy."⁴⁹ Whether this sentiment was generated by Laura or by ultimate facts that surfaced between the confession and the trial would be a ripe area of research. At any rate, Laura's skills as a criminal defense attorney were unquestioned.

The rest of Laura's legal practice seems to have been profitable as well. She maintained an office in San Francisco until 1901, adding a mix of civil and family law clients to her criminal defense cases. Her representation of Southern Pacific Rail Road must have pleased her huge client, since she was given an unlimited lifetime pass for use on the carrier. She advertised widely, including in the San Joaquin Valley.⁵⁰ Laura was also admitted to the United States Supreme Court on February 3, 1883, the second woman following Belva Lockwood, although there is no record of her having argued a case in front of that court.

Laura's approach to the practice of law was as doggedly determined and principled as everything else she attempted. When a potential client had visited

Laura's San Francisco office while Laura was out of town, she then waited in her office for two solid days until the client eventually returned. Laura also apparently stunned local attorneys when she undertook and prevailed on legal claims that they thought were untenable. Moreover, she disdained her legal opponents who would stoop to the contemptible practice of filing procedural challenges in order to delay the case or avoid the merits altogether. One adversary outraged her so with his tactics that she redoubled her resolve to beat him. "The contemptible [sic] pettifogger!" she exclaimed. "[W]hen I at length get him into Court, I'll get even with him, but not by pettifogging. I will not stoop to such law dodging."⁵¹

In 1887, Laura was invited to become a member of the Equity Club, an association of women lawyers from around the nation. Because women attorneys were still so few, and because they had so little opportunity for companionship with each other, the Club's founders conceived of a correspondence-based organization. Ideally, each member would submit one letter per year, discussing a topic of her choosing which might be relevant to other women lawyers. The letters would then be distributed to the other members. In this fashion, the founders hoped to create a dialogue as well as a community among the legal pioneers.

Laura submitted one letter to the Club, in which she applauded the concept and mission of the group. She also hoped that the existence of the Club would facilitate the expansion of the numbers of women in the legal profession, because she believed "in the absolute necessity of women having a woman lawyer if they hope to secure a just and equitable interpretation of the statutes at the Bar of Justice." Why Laura did not contribute her ideas to the Equity Club in the ensuing years may not have been her fault, as the Club's funds prevented a timely publication or circulation of the letters.⁵²

Laura practiced law for twenty years, even when her suffrage work threatened to take over her legal practice. By all accounts, Laura was well-respected as an attorney. Further research on Laura should definitely attempt to parse her legal strategy and jurisprudence. The San Joaquin County Court House reportedly maintains many of Laura's briefs on file, and they might provide a wealth of information about Laura's legal thinking and development.

Without a doubt, Laura proved indisputably that women were capable of practicing law. From the earliest point in her career, she sought to "make a showing that [would] be a refutation of the belief that women will not do for the law."⁵³ Years later, when people would explain her success as merely and exceptional case, she would reply that "[t]he number of men who have become noted for their brilliant intellectual attainments are but a fraction compared with the whole number of men in the world."⁵⁴

VI. FARM LIFE AND FAMILY LIFE

In 1901, however, Laura closed her law practice and retired to her farm in Lodi, California. Up until then, she had maintained her usual outrageous pace, juggling the demands of her clients in between her continual work in the suffrage movement. Laura's travel itinerary also had remained characteristically full throughout her professional career. When Laura finally retired, it was in large part motivated by her long-postponed need to be with her family. While Laura's public life was choked with success and congratulations, Laura's private relationships were more of a strain. Indeed, the extent to which Laura travelled, and the demands of her chosen professions, combined to make it difficult for her to sustain close relationships.

As a young woman, Laura met her future husband, the enigmatic Charles H. Gordon. Charles was a medical doctor from Scotland, and he claimed to have received his medical education in London. However, his formal education, at least as he explained it, was later discovered to be unfounded. Nevertheless, the two were married in 1862. Charles served during the Civil War as a captain in the Third Rhode Island Cavalry, and was stationed in New Orleans. Laura travelled with him as much as the exigencies of war allowed. At some point, however, Charles was dishonorably discharged from the United States military. He may have been a political scapegoat, for having challenged illicit funds flowing to the company commander.⁵⁵ Or, he may have been the ne'er-do-well that others later saw.⁵⁶

At any rate, Charles then went to Mexico, accepting a commission of Major under the liberal army of President Juarez. Fifteen months later, he resigned and joined Laura in Colorado. After this point, the pair travelled together most of the time, except for Charles' nearly-fatal search for riches in Treasure City, Nevada. Charles then set up his medical practice in Mokelumme, California, where he became a renowned local physician and active Democratic politician.

Because Charles and Laura were apart much of the time, both while he was in the military and later during Laura's suffrage campaigns, Charles wrote frequently to Laura. Fortunately, many of these letters still exist, as part of Laura's collection of papers at the Bancroft Library. Due to the painstaking work it will take to read Charles' nearly indecipherable handwriting, time constraints prevented any meaningful study of this set of letters. Undoubtedly, this work would go far to explain the nature of the marriage. As yet, Charles' influence upon Laura, whether positive or otherwise, is unreported. Even though letters from Laura to Charles have not been located, enough letters written by Charles exist that one might be able to construct a dialogue that would explain this private, yet undoubtedly significant, part of Laura's life.

By 1877, however, the marriage had crumbled. Even though Laura reported publicly that she had become a widow, she in fact filed for divorce from Charles on the grounds of adultery. Despite the fact that, on February 16, 1877, Laura wrote to a friend "during the past six months, I am now a widow, realizing to the

fullest possible degree what anguish the heart can endure,"⁵⁷ Charles continued to practice medicine in Lodi, and he married Emily Frances Stafford, a native of Nevada County, California, in 1880.

Nevertheless, as Laura predicted in that same letter, her future became brighter. In addition to having disposed of her newspaper office, most of Laura's large family had also relocated to the San Joaquin Valley by that pivotal year of 1877. Laura's parents, plus two sisters (at least), lived on the family farm in Lodi. Laura's brother John travelled throughout the state, employed as an engineer for the railroad. After Laura opened her law office in San Francisco, Laura went home nearly every weekend. Laura also participated in the planning and acquisition for the family farm, advising, for instance, to hold off selling the ducks until the market price became more favorable.⁵⁸ Laura reportedly had fantasies of eventually developing the farm as the "Woman's Syndicate Addition of Lodi," to provide a home for unmarried suffragists.⁵⁹

However, Laura was also quite lonely. When days would pass without the receipt of any personal letters, she would complain that all she received were "lots of letters from woman suffragists, but none from any of the relatives." To another friend, she expressed jealousy of that friend's daughter: "I almost envy you the possession of her, and now in my loneliness would give the world if it were possible to have a dear little child to love and pet."

That loneliness led Laura to a choice which stunned those who knew her first as an activist and attorney. Sometime in the mid 1890s, Laura adopted a child who is alternately reported as being named as "George" or "Verne."⁶⁰ Laura's friend Clara Bewick Colby remembers that "Verne" first appeared "so slender and frail that he presented the greatest possible contrast to the splendid physique and powerful personality of Mrs. Gordon. Yet this child was destined to dominate her life thereafter." Articulating the shock others felt regarding Laura's newly-emerged maternal nature, she said,

"[n]obody could understand why [Laura] should thus hamper her movements and limit her opportunities, but remonstrances of friends and the call of work she had engaged in were alike powerless to overcome the supreme argument of his recognizing and asserting need of her. She always said he was her child in spirit.... Certainly in connection with him Mrs. Gordon revealed the true mother side of her nature in a way that those who only knew her as lawyer and orator little dreamed of."

Just as the boy's name is reported inconsistently, so is the manner in which Laura acquired him. One source claims that he was her nephew, while another claims that his mother was poor and had numerous children. The latter description suggests that Laura became acquainted with him through her law practice; perhaps his mother was a family law client, unable to care for her children. Further research should reveal the truth, including his identity and

whether Laura officially adopted him. Regardless of those details, the boy filled a emotional vacuum in Laura's life like no one else had. She soon retired with him to her farm, giving up virtually all of her outwardly professional pursuits.

The boy, once grown, married one of Laura's nieces, and together they bore a baby which likewise consumed Laura's heart. So enamored of this baby was Laura that she was wholly unprepared for the infant's death in the fall of 1906. That demise shook Laura's faith and will to live.⁶¹ Prior to that year, Laura's letters had been evincing an increasing level of pessimism and exhaustion. Laura felt trapped on her farm and unable to garner the energy to resume any travels on behalf of suffrage. Combined, all of these sentiments suggest that Laura may have succumbed to a type of depression in those final years.

At last, Laura de Force Gordon rested on April 5, 1907, after a short bout with pneumonia. Her grave is at Harmony Grove Cemetery, Lockeford, California. Two sisters and her adopted son survived her.

CONCLUSION: CONNECTING THE FRAGMENTS

As I have noted throughout this sketch, much work remains to be done in reconstructing Laura's life. We know that she was exceedingly compelling. Her conflated identities symbolize the intersection of so many different American dreams and realities; at once, she was a feminist and devoutly spiritual; a lawyer and a single mother; a nomadic pioneer and a farmer. The fragments of Laura's life that have surfaced are in deed so rich with detail and character that at times she becomes superhuman or larger than life.

Yet, as we have gleaned, Laura's private thoughts and desires may not completely comport with the self-assured and brave public woman that we have met. Added research and analysis, especially of Laura's words, are crucial to a sufficiently nuanced understanding of her life. Primary sources of speeches, letters and legal briefs from all points in her life, when layered over a foundation of feminist and spiritualist philosophy, should provide the relief necessary to know Laura fully.

Laura de Force Gordon deserves to be reintroduced to all who care about women and their right to pursue the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by law, whether constitutional or spiritual. During her lifetime, she seemed but a subordinate to the national stars. Perhaps only in retrospect can we fully appreciate the magnitude of her accomplishments. However, without a commitment by a writer to the toil of her biography, she will remain silent. Laura believed that the spirits of the deceased could communicate their collective wisdom through the words of the living. Let this effort encourage Laura's communication with us.

Appendices

[Lifeline](#)

[Annotated Bibliography of Sources Consulted](#)

[Bibliographic Suggestions for Further Research](#)

Endnotes

1 Colby, Clara Bewick, *The Woman's Tribune*, May 25, 1907 (quoting a letter from Laura de Force Gordon to Colby, dated February 1905).

2 The information in this section, except where otherwise noted, is collected from: Gilb, Corrine L., "Laura de Force Gordon," in *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, vol. 2, p.68-69 (Harvard University Press, 1971); *The National Cyclopædia of American Biography*, vol. 2, pp.235-36 (White & Co., 1921); *The Valley Review*, Jan. 9, 1884, 4/1 (Lodi, California).

3 *The Valley Review*, Jan. 9, 1884, 4/1 (Lodi, California). The obituary also notes that Katy early displayed mental precocity, evidenced by the receipt of a certificate of merit after having placed at the head of her class in spelling for four days in a row -- at the age of five.

4 *While Dictionary of American Biography*, p. 425 (Scribners, year unknown), claims that she was self-educated, all other sources agree that she attended public schools. It would be interesting to learn how many years of formal education she received. The sources listed in Gilb, "Laura de Force Gordon," in *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary* may provide further clues.

5 There is absolutely no hint that any marital separations or troubles afflicted the union between Katy and Abram in their 47 years of marriage.

6 The information for this section comes mostly from Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Woman's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Beacon Press, 1989); Robert J. Chandler, "In the Van: Spiritualists as Catalysts for the California Women's Suffrage Movement," *73 California History* 188 (Fall 1994); Gilb, Corrine L., "Laura de Force Gordon," in *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, vol. 2, pp.68-69 (Harvard University Press, 1971): and *The Woman's Tribune* (Portland, O R), May 25, 1907.

7 An unsigned letter from a correspondent in Newburgh, Indiana, stated that, in 1861, Spiritualism was only a year old there, but that the faith was gathering

many converts due to Laura's recent appearance there. While encouraged by the number of new members, the writer was in doubt that they could find as good a speaker to replace Laura. Miscellaneous letters, "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

8 Clara Bewick Colby, *The Woman's Tribune* (Portland, OR), May 25, 1907.

9 Barbara Allen Babcock, "Clara Shortridge Foltz: 'First Woman,'" 28 *Valparaiso University Law Review* 1231 (Summer 1994)(citing a contemporary newspaper report of the speech).

10 *The Valley Review*, Jan. 9, 1884, 4/1 (Lodi, California).

11 *The National Cyclopædia of American Biography*, vol. 2, p.235 (White & Co., 1921).

12 Letter from Gordon to Clara Bewick Colby, cited in *The Woman's Tribune* (Portland, OR), May 25, 1907.

13 Chandler, *supra*, at p.195.

14 Laura de Force Gordon, "Woman's Sphere from a Woman's Standpoint," in *The Congress of Women*, Eagle, Mary K. O., ed., p. 74 (International Publishing, Chicago, 1894).

15 Letters from other suffragists, including Susan B. Anthony, to Laura in late 1869 discuss Laura's suffrage work, and are postmarked to Laura in Oakland and San Francisco. "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

16 Material for this section was gathered from: Robert J. Chandler, "In the Van: Spiritualists as Catalysts for the California Women's Suffrage Movement," 73 *California History* 188 (Fall 1994); Corrine L. Gilb, "Laura de Force Gordon," in *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, vol. 2, pp.68-69 (Harvard University Press, 1971); Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Mathilda J. Gage, and Ida Husted Harper, eds., *History of Women's Suffrage*, vol. III-IV (1886, 1902) (hereinafter HWS); and *The Woman's Tribune* (Portland, OR), May 25, 1907.

17 HWS, vol. III, p. 753.

18 *Id.*

19 Letter from Gordon to Fanny B. Ames, Feb. 1, 1870, "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

20 Barbara Allen Babcock, Clara Shortridge Foltz: "First Woman", 28 Val. U. L. Rev. 1231, n.24 (Summer, 1994).

21 Letters from Anthony to Gordon, 1868-71, "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

22 Letter from Foltz to Gordon, May 2, 1871, Id.

23 HWS, p. 755. The other two women were Caroline H. Spear and Laura Cuppy Smith.

24 Susan Scheiber Edelman, "'A Red Hot Suffrage Campaign': The Woman Suffrage Cause in California, 1896," California Supreme Court Historical Society Yearbook, Vol. 2 (1995).

25 Colby, The Women's Tribune, May 25, 1907.

26 See also HWS, vol. 4, p. 484 for information on an oral argument Laura delivered on school suffrage on February 7, 1891. Again, in 1895, Laura and Clara Foltz were center stage when a women's delegation presented a bill for enfranchisement before a joint meeting with the Judiciary and Election Committees of both legislative chambers. Laura gave the opening address while Clara delivered the closing speech. The legislature passed the bill after considerable debate, but not before requiring that the amendment also be approved by popular vote. The bill subsequently failed at polls. The Bancroft Library has a copy of the Laura's oral argument, in which she advances a constitutional argument in support of the state legislature enacting a women's suffrage statute. Journal of the [California] Assembly, 1895 31st Session p.127, "Brief of Laura de Force Gordon."

27 Barbara Allen Babcock, "Western Women Lawyers," 45 Stan. L. Rev. 2179 at n.16 (Jul. 1993).

28 The full text of the bill, codified at Article 20, section 18, of the California Constitution: "No person shall, on account of sex, be disqualified from entering upon or pursuing any lawful business, vocation or profession."

29 The Sacramento Bee, Mar. 19, 1880.

30 The Sacramento Bee, Jan. 14, 1879.

31 The Sacramento Bee (date unknown) (clipping in the "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.)

32 Colby, The Woman's Tribune, May 25, 1907.

33 Laura de Force Gordon, "Woman's Sphere from a Woman's Standpoint," in The Congress of Women, Eagle, Mary K. O., ed., pp. 74-76 (International Publishing, Chicago, 1894).

34 Indeed, Laura served as a delegate to several national suffrage conventions, in campaigned for a suffrage provision in the constitution for the State of Washington. Work such as this required extensive travel, which, in Laura's time, was slow and lonely. See also Virginia G. Drachman, Women Lawyers and the Origins of Professional Identity in America: The Letters of the Equity Club, 1887 to 1890, p. 226 (University of Michigan Press, 1993) for reports that Gordon often had to travel alone by stagecoach on the suffrage trail.

35 See miscellaneous letters from Laura to Mrs. Knox, and from Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Foltz, contained in the Laura Gordon Collection at the Bancroft Library, describing the financial difficulty Laura faced in financing her suffrage work. In particular, Clara Shortridge Foltz condemns the wealthy women for failing to contribute to Laura's efforts. Clara declares, "If all of the woman suffragists would have worked as you have done, we might and would have gained something in the Con[vention]." Letter from Foltz to Gordon, Nov. 20, 1878.

36 This section is based largely on the following sources: Corrine L., Gilb, "Laura de Force Gordon," in Notable American Women, 1607-1950 : A Biographical Dictionary, vol. 2, pp. 68-69 (Harvard University Press, 1971); An Illustrated History of San Joaquin County, California, (Chicago, Lewis Publishing Co., 1890); Thompson and West, History of San Joaquin County California with Illustrations, (Reproduction) (Howell-North Book, Berkeley, California, 1968); and Tinkham, George H., A History of Stockton (Hinton & Co., 1880).

37 Stockton Record, Feb. 2, 1950.

38 One contemporary account believed that the success of Laura's efforts was owing to "the novelty of a pretty editress." George H. Tinkham, A History of Stockton p. 271 (Hinton & Co., 1880).

39 Thompson and West, History of San Joaquin County California with Illustrations, p. 116 (Reproduction) Howell-North Book (Berkeley, California, 1968).

40 Laura de Force Gordon, The Great Geysers of California (and How to Reach Them). Illustrated (Bacon & Co., San Francisco, 1877).

41 For compelling details of the two women's lobbying and dramatic legal challenge to open the legal profession to women, enjoy the storytelling provided by Professor Barbara Allen Babcock in: "Clara Shortridge Foltz: Constitution-Maker," 66 *Indiana Law Journal* 849 (Fall, 1991); "Clara Shortridge Foltz: First Woman," 28 *Valparaiso University Law Review* 1231 (Summer 1994); and "Western Women Lawyers," 45 *Stanford Law Review* 2179 (Jul. 1993). Rather than repeat the rich story in this preliminary sketch of Laura's life, I only highlight the pieces of Laura's legal career that have yet to be explained so thoroughly.

42 Laura documents her plans and thoughts in a series of letters to her relatives during September 1879, while the claims were pending. Letters from Gordon, "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

43 Clara had also been admitted to appear in a local trial court one year prior to this admittance.

44 Mary McHenry Keith entered as first woman in the year following Clara's and Laura's victory at trial, becoming the first woman to graduate from law school in the state. She was delighted that Laura escorted Mary to her first lecture, and observed that both Clara and Laura attended occasional lectures throughout her three years at Hastings. Tribute to Laura De Force Gordon, *Progress*, May 07, 1907.

45 *San Francisco Call*, Feb. 19, 1880, 1/7.

46 Various newspaper accounts spell the defendant's name alternately as "Saldes," "Saldee," "Baldes," and "Valdes."

47 *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 12, 1880, 3/8.

48 *Stockton Record*, Feb. 2, 1950.

49 *San Francisco Call*, Jan. 30, 1882, 3/3.

50 Revealing the attempt to establish an "old girls' network," advertisements for both Laura's and Clara's law practices were repeatedly displayed in the first column above the fold in *Gertie's Valley Review*.

51 Letter from Laura to Gurtie, Apr. 16, 1980.

52 For the history and challenges of the Equity Club, see generally Virginia G. Drachman, *Women Lawyers and the Origins of Professional Identity in America: The Letters of the Equity Club, 1887 to 1890* (University of Michigan Press, 1993).

53 San Francisco Chronicle, Aug. 12, 1880.

54 Laura de Force Gordon, "Woman's Sphere from a Woman's Standpoint," in *The Congress of Women*, Eagle, Mary K. O., ed., p. 75 (International Publishing, Chicago, 1894).

55 Undated newspaper clipping authored by Milt Callis, contained in the "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

56 Robert J. Chandler, "In the Van: Spiritualists as Catalysts for the California Women's Suffrage Movement," *73 California History* 188 (Fall 1994).

57 Letter from Laura Gordon to another "dear friend Laura," "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

58 Letters from Laura to another "Dear Ones At Home," "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

59 Undated clipping by C. K. McClatchy in the *Sacramento Bee*.

60 *The Woman's Tribune*, May 25, 1907; and *Stockton Record*, Feb., 6, 1950.

61 Laura claimed that the death "has nearly wrung the soul out of me." Letter from Laura to Clara Bewick Colby, cited in *The Woman's Tribune*, May 25, 1907.

Appendix C

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Duniway, Abigail S., Path Breaking: an Autobiographical History of the Equal Suffrage Movement in Pacific Coast States (1914).

Elwood-Akers, Virginia, "Clara Shortridge Foltz: California's First Woman Lawyer," 28 Pacific Historian 23 (1984).

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Frank, Dr. Louis, "The Woman Lawyers," 3 Chicago Law Times (1889).

Furay, Sally, "The Genesis of Sail'er Inn in the California Constitution," 1994 California Supreme Court Historical Society Yearbook, pp. 153-57 (1994).

Letters, generally, included in other suffragists' collections, either by, to, or about LDFG. Since the Laura de Force Gordon collection at the Bancroft does not have many letter from LDFG, her letters must be scattered among the extant collections of the recipients. Specifically:

Letters from LDFG to Clara Dewick Colby, quoted in Colby, The Woman's Tribune, May 25, 1907 (Portland, OR). Clara quotes nine letters written by Laura to Clara between 1891-1906. Location unknown.

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The San Francisco Examiner. Mar. 20, 1880, 1/2 (report on the woman suffrage debate, including references to Laura and Clara).

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Stockton Independent (California). Apr. 6, 1907.

The Valley Review (Lodi, California). Search June 1883, for obituary and biographical information for Abram De Force (Father of LDFG). Also, search generally for any information about LDFG, her business or her family.

The Valley Review was a weekly newspaper owned and edited by Gertie De Force Cluff (sister of LDFG) from 1878-1884. Volumes 4-13 (with some missing issues) are currently on microfilm at the California State Library, California History Room.

APPENDIX B

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SOURCES CONSULTED

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Gordon, Laura de Force, The Great Geysers of California (and How to Reach Them). Illustrated (Bacon & Co., San Francisco, 1877).

A travel guide of the Napa Valley, this is the only book published by LDFG. It is held at the Bancroft Library, shelved at F870.G4G7.

Gordon, Laura de Force, "Woman's Sphere from a Woman's Standpoint," in The Congress of Women, Eagle, Mary K.O., ed., pp. 74-76 (International Publishing, Chicago, 1894).

The full text of an address delivered by LDFG to the Congress of Women at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. A collection of portraits, biographies and addresses pertaining to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, including the full text of a speech written by LDFG.

An Illustrated History of San Joaquin County, California, (Chicago, Lewis Publishing Co., 1890).

This is available several places, including the Stanford University Library Rare Books Special Collection at F868.S17.

Keith, Mary McHenry, "Tribute to Laura De Force Gordon," Progress, May 07, 1907.

"Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

This collection contains numerous letters and clippings. The letters are organized alphabetically by last name of the writer. They are most likely the letters that LDFG had in her possession at the time of her death, as they contain many letters written by other people to her. Also included are a small number of letters that LDFG wrote to her family. Lastly, the collection contains a number of

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The Valley Review was a weekly newspaper owned and edited by Gertie De Force Cluff (sister of LDFG) from 1878-1884. Volumes 4-13 (with some missing issues) are currently on microfilm at the California State Library, California History Room.

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Mar. 8, 1990, 5/3: Announcement that Clara Foltz was admitted to the United States Supreme Court, noting that LDFG had previously become only the second woman admitted.

May 25, 1907, ?/? : Tribute to LDFG by Clara Bewick Colby upon Laura's death. In the article, Clara quotes nine letters written by Laura to Clara between 1891-1906.

The Woman's Tribune is a periodical which was published at the turn of the century by Clara Bewick Colby. It is currently held at Stanford Green Library on a microfilm series entitled History of Women, N.S. 1508, Reels P230, P231, and P232. The periodical is neither indexed nor on Socrates.

APPENDIX A

Laura De Force Gordon: Fragments of Her Life

A Sketch of a Pioneer by Reneé F. Hawkins

The Lifeline

August 17, 1838	Laura De Force is born in Erie County Pennsylvania to Abram De Force and Katy Allen. She is one of nine children. <i>Who were her parents and how did they support the family?</i>
1852?	Laura begins trance-speaking. <i>How was she introduced to Spiritualism?</i>
1862	Laura marries Charles H. Gordon, an Army Doctor from Scotland. <i>Was he the finest doctor in the San Joaquin Central Valley, or a fraud?</i>
February 19, 1868	Laura delivers the first public woman suffrage speech in California. <i>What did she say?</i>
January 1870	The California State Woman Suffrage Society was formed. <i>What was Laura's role in the early dissension?</i>
1870-1871	Laura delivered over 200 suffrage lectures along the Pacific Coast, delivering a bill on woman suffrage to the Nevada State Legislature using her State Senatorial campaign to further the good cause. <i>What happened to her Spiritualism?</i>
1872-1877	Laura labored as a journalist, owning two papers and writing for many more. <i>Why did she view the work as hateful drudgery?</i>
1877	Laura's marriage to Charles ends. Laura publishes a travel book. Laura begins to read law. Laura becomes incredibly productive for about twenty years. <i>Why was this year so pivotal?</i>
December 6, 1879	Clara Shortridge Foltz and Laura De Force Gordon are admitted to the California State Bar. <i>Why did Laura not return to Hastings?</i>
February 19, 1880	Laura persuaded a California Superior Court, sitting en banc, that the local 'dive ordinance' was unconstitutional. <i>Was Laura a proponent of strict equality?</i>
August 1880	Laura becomes the first woman to defend a murder suspect, and the jury acquits him after only thirty minutes of deliberation. <i>Why did she loosen her curls for her</i>

	<i>closing argument?</i>
February 1881	Laura and Clara are adversaries in the Wheeler menage à trois murder. In her early summation, Laura declares to the jury: "Every man, woman and child seems to be afflicted with homicidal mania, howling for a victim." <i>Was she a beatnik ahead of her time?</i>
1880s	Laura enjoys a thriving law practice in criminal law, family law and even representing the Octopus, the Southern Pacific Railroad. <i>Why was she so lonely?</i>
1883	Laura successfully drafts and lobbies for a bill establishing the State Board of Silk Culture and appropriating money for a Filature school. <i>Was Laura everything to everyone?</i>
1884-1894	Laura follows Clara's footsteps and becomes president of the California State Woman Suffrage Society. <i>What really was the nature of the competition between Clara and Laura?</i>
1891	As was typical for Laura, she presented and lobbied for three bills in the legislative session, including bills on women's rights regarding property and notaries, which passed, and school suffrage, which didn't. <i>How did Laura remain so determined?</i>
1893	The first mention of Laura's adoption of George/Verne, then eight years old. <i>How did she obtain him?</i>
1895	Dissension and procedural disputes at the California State Woman Suffrage Society resulted in Laura losing the right to attend the national conference as the official delegate. Laura becomes saddened over the disappearance of the foremothers from the suffrage movement, but still believed that women would attain suffrage soon. <i>Was this the beginning of a clinical depression?</i>
1901	Laura retires her law practice and assumes the management of her farm in Lodi, California. <i>Was Laura publicly honored for her work before she died?</i>
April 5, 1907	Laura dies after suffering from a severe cold. <i>Did Laura die of a broken spirit?</i>

The Themes

Construction of the Woman, Then & Now

Fragments: Sources and letters are scattered. Many gaps and questions remain. LDFG is treated as a subordinate clause.

Discrepancies: Biographical data often conflicts.

Identities: LDFG bore many professional and personal identities, yet her politics remained solid. She was adaptable, and able to convert failures into opportunities.

Short-Term Goal: To consolidate sources and create an annotated bibliography.

Long-Term Goal: To reassemble the fragments and make her whole again.

Assist with or write biography.

Establish her grave as a state historical landmark.