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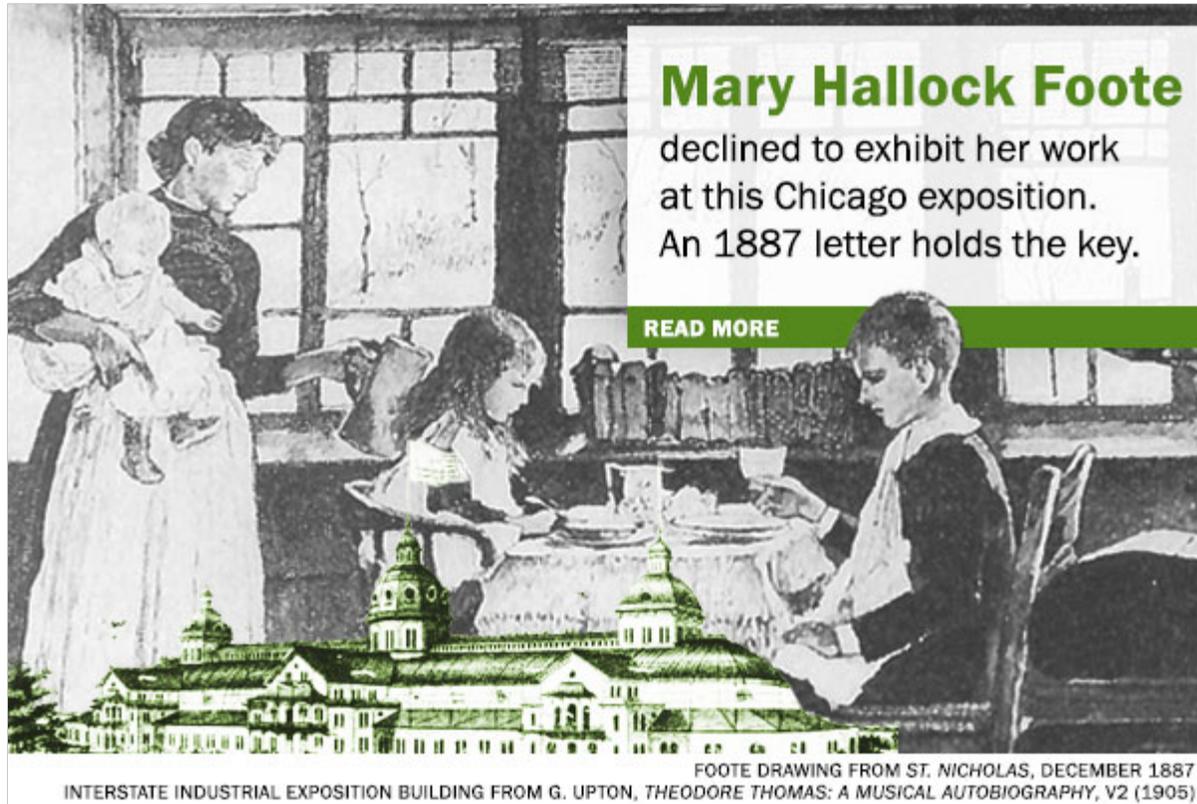
Progressive Foote? Gender Politics in an 1887 Letter from Mary Hallock Foote

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Ken Winkleman played a vital role in research on this project by helping the author to rule out her first theories about the context of the Foote letter and providing information about the suffrage movement in Idaho. Thanks also to Reprints Editor Jennifer Adkison for overseeing peer review of this article and to the anonymous reviewers for their comments.



Mary Hallock Foote

declined to exhibit her work at this Chicago exposition. An 1887 letter holds the key.

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FOOTE DRAWING FROM ST. NICHOLAS, DECEMBER 1887
INTERSTATE INDUSTRIAL EXPOSITION BUILDING FROM G. UPTON, *THEODORE THOMAS: A MUSICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY*, V2 (1905)

Progressive Foote?

Gender Politics in an 1887 Letter from Mary Hallock Foote

Tara Penry, Boise State University

Mary Hallock Foote is not known for progressive gender politics. Quite the opposite. As her biographer Darlis Miller observes, Foote and her longtime friend Helena DeKay Gilder agreed that woman's most important work lay in the home, and suffrage would distract her from her primary duties.¹ But Foote did not always practice her belief in the separate spheres of men and women perfectly. Not only did necessity compel her for a time to support her family with her work, but an 1887 letter also shows that in her professional life, Foote did not always think of her work as feminine or separate from the work of men.

This essay began not with questions about Foote's gender politics but as an investigation of a mysterious letter. In the Special Collections department at Albertsons Library at Boise State University, not far from where the Footes lived in Idaho, a cryptic letter from 1887 shows the illustrator and author declining to participate in something relating to woman's suffrage, but the letter is brief and the correspondent does not otherwise appear in Foote's biography. This essay began as an inquiry into the circumstances behind the letter. Who was the correspondent? Why was she writing to an author and artist working in remote Idaho? And

where did Mary Hallock Foote decide *not* to exhibit her work when invited? The answers to these questions not only provide a glimpse into the lives and passions of professional, writing women experiencing vastly different urban and rural wests in the 1880s, but they also suggest how complex were the politics of women's work in this period.

In the summer of 1887, at age 39, Foote was a well-established author and illustrator, publishing regularly in *Century* and other prominent national magazines. She was also a mother of three children (her youngest barely a year old), living upriver from Boise, Idaho, and supporting her family with her pen and pencil while her husband sought financial backing to build an irrigation system for the Boise valley. A picture she drew at this time for the children's magazine *St. Nicholas* depicts explicitly her domestic absorptions. (See title illustration.) So when another professional woman from Chicago wrote to solicit books for an exhibit of "woman's work," Foote had other priorities than a stranger's unsought appeal. Like many such appeals, this one failed to persuade its target audience. But Foote was polite enough to respond to Alice Stockham, M.D. To all appearances, the letter supports what we already know about Foote – that she did not support woman's suffrage or other progressive causes. But as we discover more about the circumstances behind the letter, a slightly modified gender politics emerges – one that aligns Foote rather surprisingly with progressive professional women of Chicago and suggests her imperfect allegiance to the ideology of separate spheres.

With its proper context lost to time, the letter seems firmly dismissive of progressive women's politics. It reads,

Boise, Idaho

Aug 15th 1887

Alice B. Stockham M.D.

Dear Madam:

I should not wish to exhibit my books or drawings as "woman's work", as they are not put in the market on that basis; nor should I care to contribute towards the campaign for municipal suffrage, not being entirely in sympathy with it as a means towards the progress of woman.

Yours very Respectfully

Mary Hallock Foote²

Since scholars do not thus far know the context of this letter, its double rejections of women's causes - an exhibit on the one hand and suffrage on the other - indicate either a gender conservative, a busy public figure who cannot be bothered with someone else's crusade, or both. Though Foote herself would not have known it, her distaste for an exhibit of "woman's

work” placed her among the progressive professional women of Chicago. To understand this, we must know more about Alice B. Stockham, the “exhibit” in question, and the gender politics of Chicago expositions around the late 1880s.

Born in Ohio in 1833, fourteen years Foote’s senior, Alice Bunker Stockham began writing after a medical career of more than twenty years. She earned an MD from a medical school in Cincinnati in 1854 and practiced family medicine and homeopathy in Indiana, Kansas, and Chicago.³ She married a fellow doctor in 1857 and had two children. The 1880s found her venturing into publishing. In 1883 she wrote and published a guide to gynecology, childbirth, and women’s sexuality that sold in its first twenty years, according to a notice on the book’s anniversary, approximately half a million copies.⁴ The book, *Tokology*, was polemical as well as practical, arguing that marriages would be stronger if men and women were not taught to view their sexual needs as vastly different. The book was translated into German, French, Finnish, Swedish, and Russian. Leo Tolstoy so admired it that he invited Stockham to visit his home, and arranged for the book’s translation into Russian.⁵

Stockham later published more books and pamphlets on women’s health, sexuality, and related topics, and she founded her own publishing house to accommodate her often radical and frank subjects. In 1905, with Clarence Darrow as her defense attorney, she was found guilty and fined under the Comstock obscenity laws for sending her books through the mail.⁶ In the same year, Mary Hallock Foote looked back on her career and said with pride that she had never let her work interfere with the “chief” duties of her family and home life.⁷

The exact nature of Stockham’s invitation to Foote has hitherto been unknown to Foote scholars. A trail of primary sources makes it clear that the “exhibit” in question was not related to woman’s suffrage, as one might infer from the extant letter. Stockham wrote Foote in 1887 to invite her participation in an exhibit of women’s literature at the Fifteenth annual Chicago Inter-state Industrial Exposition, which lasted from 7 September to 22 October. A notice in the Boston magazine *The Writer* for September 1887 explains with rather strained syntax why Stockham made contact with the Idaho sketch-writer and novelist:

“That literature should take the preference of the tidy and crazy quilt” in the space allotted to woman’s work by the managers of the Chicago Inter-State Industrial Exposition, is the very commendable wish of Dr. Alice B. Stockham, who represents the literary department of the woman’s exhibit. She is working hard to secure its fulfillment by getting specimens of books, magazines, and pamphlets that are the work of women. Any authors who have not been applied to personally will confer a great favor on her if they will send such specimens directly to her at 159 La Salle street, Chicago. As the exposition will open September 7, they should be forwarded at once.⁸

Stockham distributed her press release to periodicals ranging from the highbrow *Nation* of Boston and popular *Godey’s Lady’s Book* of Philadelphia to the New York trade journal *The American Stationer*. These magazines published some version of Stockham’s announcement in August or September issues.⁹ The late date of all the requests suggests that Stockham may have

come late to the job of organizing this exhibit, or that the exhibit itself was authorized late in the planning stages for the exposition.

As the notice in *The Writer* indicates, Stockham solicited work from women writers by applying personally to authors as well as placing notices in journals. *The Nation* added further that Stockham was “looking up author addresses,” and recommended to her a two-volume directory of American literary authors. Casting a wide net, Stockham evidently intended to send personal letters to any woman writer whose address she could obtain in her limited time frame. One writer whose address was already known to Stockham was the Evanston, Illinois, journalist, clubwoman, and suffrage activist, Elizabeth Boynton Harbert. Like Foote in Idaho, Harbert also received one of Stockham’s letters, and she replied from a lakeside resort near Chicago on 8 August:

Dr. Alice B. Stockham

Chairman, W.E. Committee¹⁰

In reply to your question I regret to say that editions of my two little books “Out of Her Sphere” and “The Golden Fleece” are almost entirely exhausted. I have but one copy for each of my children. I will send one of each for the exhibit but cannot donate any. Will donate bound volume of “The New Era” and file of *Carnival Herald*. I enclose in this one dollar due for tracts ordered sent to Rhode Island.

Cordially,

Elizabeth B. Harbert¹¹

The Harbert and Foote letters complement and help to explain each other. In the Foote letter, it is not clear how the exhibit of “woman’s work” and the cause of municipal suffrage relate to each other, or what sort of contribution Foote has been asked to make. The Harbert letter answers these questions: an author can submit a book for the exhibit without donating it, or she can submit a book for the exhibit *and* donate it. The Foote letter explains what Harbert takes for granted: donations will benefit the cause of woman’s suffrage.

In 1887, Harbert could take suffrage for granted as the cause of Stockham’s advocacy, for these two Chicago-area women already knew each other as Illinois delegates to the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) and professional clubwomen. Harbert founded the Pro and Con club in 1876 for discussion of suffrage, and ten years later she and Stockham were charter members of the Illinois Woman’s Press Club.¹² Both attended the national AWSA convention in 1884 as delegates from Illinois, when Harbert was also a committee chair. Stockham addressed the convention in 1885, and Harbert in January 1887.¹³ Not long after Harbert’s 1887 speech, news reached the AWSA delegates during the convention that Kansas had passed “municipal suffrage” for women, or the right of women to vote in certain local elections. Though the AWSA did not adopt formal resolutions relating to municipal suffrage that

year, Harbert and Stockham would have been aware of the recent legislation in Kansas, so the cause of municipal suffrage in particular would have been very much on their minds while others in Chicago were preparing for the Fifteenth annual Inter-state Industrial Exposition.¹⁴

Given Stockham's close involvement with the American Woman's Suffrage Association, it comes as no surprise that she would seek donations to support the cause of suffrage, whether municipal, school, or "full," in the parlance of the movement. But the 1887 Inter-state Industrial Exposition represents a surprising departure for Stockham, as it had nothing to do with suffrage or Stockham's other professional and social interests, women's and children's health. The Inter-state Industrial Exposition (IIE) was founded by Chicago businessmen in 1873 to support commerce.¹⁵ Originally, the exposition had no woman's exhibit, and it did not feature literature in its department of Fine and Liberal Arts – a department defined chiefly by painting and other visual arts.¹⁶ A small number of women were included in the original exhibition, listed among men in the same department. They had no separate department or exhibit. The IIE helped Chicago reestablish itself commercially after the great fire of 1871,¹⁷ and it served as an incubator for the Columbian Exposition of 1893,¹⁸ but historians do not view the exposition as a locus of feminist activity.

The Inter-state Industrial Exposition has not received enough scholarly attention for us to know how, why, or whether the Exposition eventually *did* adopt a Woman's Exhibit. The thirteen-page exhibit catalog for 1887 does not, despite Stockham's eleventh-hour efforts, give evidence of a separate Woman's Exhibit (though it's possible that a smaller Woman's Exhibit did occur within the Fine Arts department).¹⁹ We do not know whether Stockham was successful in displaying women's books at the 1887 IIE, or whether IIE managers struggled like the organizers of the 1893 Columbian Exposition over the best way to organize women's work. We do know that the shift from representing the works of a few women in the main IIE exhibits to collecting the work of women in a designated "department" had both progressive and retrograde implications for feminists of the 1880s and 1890s. On the one hand, the evidence of the successful 1893 Columbian Exposition suggests that a separate Woman's Department may have allowed more women and more industries associated with women to be represented. On the other hand, by the end of the nineteenth century, women trained for historically male professions such as medicine, law, and journalism believed that the work of women should be judged alongside the work of men, not evaluated on separate terms and awarded separate prizes.

This debate about whether to assimilate or segregate women's work raged around 1890 among women involved in planning the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. A group of professional women calling themselves Isabellas – after the queen who sponsored Columbus' voyages – argued that women should exhibit alongside men in the Columbian Exposition. But the national (male) Commissioners of the fair appointed only one Isabella to the board of over a hundred "Lady Managers." The president of the Lady Managers, Bertha Palmer of Chicago, advocated a separate building where women's work could be displayed as such.²⁰ In light of this later quarrel about how best to represent women, the effort to stage a separate Woman's Exhibit in

the 1887 Inter-state Industrial Exposition could be viewed as an encouragement to female participation - or as a step away from women's full integration in the industrial economy.

For the progressive feminist Alice Stockham, the important issue surrounding the intended IIE woman's exhibit of 1887 seems not to have been the abstract question of whether women and men should exhibit together or apart, but the very practical opportunity to collect books to support municipal suffrage - a cause that would not succeed in Chicago until the twentieth century. Her scheme seems to have been promoting suffrage by attaching it to an industrial exhibit whose aims were otherwise politically neutral. Interestingly, the public notices in periodicals do not betray the association of a suffrage benefit with the exhibit. Only in private letters does Stockham seem to have associated the exhibit with suffrage.

But Foote did not simply decline to donate to the cause of woman's suffrage. Her two responses to two questions place her, at least according to abstract principle, among both the conservative and progressive women of her day. Scholars who read the letter do not miss the conservative interpretation: typically the letter is cited as evidence of Foote's dismissive attitude toward suffrage and feminist activism.²¹ However, in declining to exhibit her writing as "woman's work," she anticipates the Isabellas. Around 1890, professional Chicago women wanted women's work to mix with men's in expositions as in the marketplace. Like these women, Foote put her "work" upon the "market" as a man would - to earn money and pay her bills. And like them, she wanted her work evaluated by the same authority that evaluated men - in Foote's case, the exacting *Century* editor, Richard Watson Gilder. While we should still read this letter as evidence of Foote's distaste for suffrage, the letter also complicates our understanding of Foote's belief in the ideology of "separate spheres" for women and men. She valued most highly her "work" as a mother, but when she thought of her professional writing and illustrating, she did not wish to be segregated or judged by gender.

Notes

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1. Miller, *Mary Hallock Foote: Author-Illustrator of the American West* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 174-76.
2. Mary Hallock Foote Letter, 15 Aug 1887. Idaho Writers Archive. Mss 223. Albertsons Library Special Collections, Boise State University.
3. The best biography of Stockham is the profile by Beryl Satter in *Women Building Chicago*,

1790-1990: *A Biographical Dictionary*, eds. Rima Lunin Schultz and Adele Hast (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2001), 851-54. Stockham was elected vice president of the Homeopathic Medical Association in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1876, as recorded in Daniel Webster Wilder, *The Annals of Kansas, New Edition, 1541-1885* (Topeka: T. Dwight Thacher, Kansas Publishing House, 1886), 705. Google Books.

4. "News of the Book Trade – Chicago Letter." *The Literary World* [Boston] 34 (July 1903): 183. Ed Samuel R. Crocker. Google Books. In their introduction to *Women Building Chicago, 1790-1990*, Schultz and Hast report that *Tokology* (1883) sold 160,000 copies by 1891 and was in its 45th edition in 1897 (xxviii). In her profile of Stockham for that volume, Beryl Satter calls the book "an immediate hit" and "the standard work on women's health, sexuality, pregnancy, and childbirth for literate Americans" (852). The book, Satter claims, helped to "transform sexual intercourse from a horror to a communion" for women (852). See also Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999).

5. Stockham travelled to Finland, Russia, and Tolstoy's home in Sept-Oct 1889, two years after she wrote to Foote. James Cracraft describes the visit to Tolstoy in *Two Shining Souls: Jane Addams, Leo Tolstoy, and the Quest for Global Peace* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2012), 32. On the translations of *Tokology*, see Satter, "Alice Bunker Stockham," 852.

6. "Alice Bunker Stockham," *Evanston Women's History Project*, 14 Oct 2008. <http://www.evanstonwomen.org>. Accessed 30 April 2013.

7. Miller, *Mary Hallock Foote*, 175.

8. "News and Notes." *The Writer* [Boston] 1.6 (Sept 1887): 120. Ed. William H. Hills and Robert Luce. Google Books.

9. Notices about the exhibit appeared in *The Nation* 44-45 (18 Aug 1887): 135, *Godey's Lady's Book* 116 (Jan 1888): 85, and *The American Stationer* 22 (1 Sept 1887): 494. At the time of this writing, all three are available digitally in Google Books.

10. As the press notice in *The Writer* suggests, W. E. must stand for Woman's Exhibit.

11. Letter to Alice B. Stockham 1887 by Elizabeth Harbert, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Elizabeth Boynton Harbert Collection.

12. See the profile for Elizabeth Boynton Harbert at *Evanston Women's History Project*, 13 May 2010, <http://www.evanstonwomen.org>; and Norma Fay Green, "Illinois Woman's Press Association, 1885-Present," in *Women's Press Organizations, 1881-1999*, ed. Elizabeth V. Burt (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), 2000, 75-76.

13. Ida Husted Harper and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. 4, 1883-1900 (New York: National American Woman Suffrage Association, 1902), 24, 64, 115. Google Books.

14. Harper and Stanton, *History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. 4, 122-23. Google Books.

15. The Exposition in its first year "ran seven weeks, drew 600,000 people, and took in \$137,413.24 — and this while the Panic of 1873 was at its worst" ("The Inter-state Exposition Building, 1873-1892," *Chicago History* 7.11 [Spring 1966], 324). For a contemporary account of the origins and motives of the IIE, see *The Inter-state Exposition Souvenir* (Chicago : Van Arsdale & Massie, 1873). Hathi Trust or Internet Archive.

16. The 1873 Exposition was organized in eight departments. Paintings, sculpture, architecture & design, photographs, wood carvings, stained glass, an a small miscellaneous section

composed Department A – Fine and Liberal Arts. Other departments were devoted to Objects used in Dwellings and for Personal Wear, Products of the Farm, Orchard, Nursery, Garden and Greenhouse, etc. (*Official Catalogue of the Inter-state Industrial Exposition of Chicago, Ill.* [Chicago: J. Nowlan, 1873], Appendix A. Hathi Trust.)

17. The governor of Illinois invoked the 1871 fire during the opening ceremonies of the first IIE, saying, “In memory of the ashes, in honor of the rebuilding, Chicago now inaugurates its Exposition on the ground which, two years ago, was blackened with fire” (quoted in “The Inter-State Exposition Building, 1873-1892,” *Chicago History* 7.11 [Spring 1966], 323).

18. Though historians do not view the 1893 exposition as a direct result or outgrowth of the IIE, some Chicago businessmen served on both IIE and Columbian Exposition boards, and Henry B. Fuller reports that the IIE directors in 1885 resolved to support a fair in Chicago on the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ arrival in the New World (“Development of Arts and Letters,” in *Centennial History of Illinois, Vol. 4, The Industrial State, 1870-1893*, eds. Ernest Ludlow Bogart and Charles Manfred Thompson [Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1920, 1922], 210. Google Books.)

19. *Inter-state Industrial Exposition Program, 1887*, Chicago History Museum Research Center, Call number F38MZ 1873-91 .I6A3. For Department I., Fine Arts, Industrial and Decorative Designs, the program refers to a “Special Classification and Catalogue,” which may reveal a Woman’s Exhibit within this department, though this special catalogue has not come to light.

20. This debate and its fallout are described particularly well in Jeanne Madeline Weimann, *The Fair Women* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981), 30, 50-72.

21. Laura Woodworth-Ney uses the letter to observe that Idaho clubwomen did not necessarily support suffrage (“Elizabeth Layton DeMary and the Rupert Culture Club: New Womanhood in a Reclamation Settlement Community,” in *Portraits of Women in the American West*, ed. Dee Garceau-Hagen [New York: Routledge, 2005], 259n69). See also Christine Hill Smith, *Social Class in the Writings of Mary Hallock Foote* (Reno: Univ. of Nevada Press, 2009), 186n12.

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