Julia Pettee's Year in Brooklyn at the Pratt Institute Library School: 1894-1895

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JULIA PETTEE'S YEAR IN BROOKLYN AT THE PRATT INSTITUTE LIBRARY SCHOOL: 1894-1895

By Mario Charles and Sandra Roff

Slightly more than one hundred years have passed since Julia Pettee completed the training program for librarians at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn. This young feminist and her classmates exemplified the “new women” who enrolled in professional schools to pursue careers uncommon for earlier nineteenth-century females. Pettee reveled in the rich political and cultural life of turn-of-the-century Brooklyn, forthrightly taking her stand as an opponent of Tammany Hall in the election of 1894, and, one year later, as a sympathizer with labor during the Brooklyn trolley strike. After completing her studies at Pratt she enrolled and then worked at Vassar College, unusual accomplishments for a woman by contemporary standards. Eventually, Pettee achieved a nationwide reputation for her significant contributions to the profession of librarianship. This article examines the year at Pratt and later career of this progressive defender of female equality.

Julia Pettee was born in 1873 in the middle-class town of Salisbury, a rural community tucked away in Connecticut's northwest corner. After her mother died when she was a child, her father remarried and Julia was reared by her stepmother, as well as encouraged by a teacher, Almira Cleveland, who recalled that the girl “love[d] school and thought to continue [her] education.” After graduating from high school Pettee prepared for college at the Academy Building School in Salisbury, Lakeville's sister town, and then attended Mt. Holyoke Seminary. When encouraged by another teacher to go beyond her seminary education, she enrolled in the recently founded Pratt Institute School of Library Training.1

Pratt Institute opened in 1887 with the objective of promoting “manual and industrial education, and to supplement this later by advanced work in science and art.” It was the third institution of higher education established in Brooklyn, preceded by Brooklyn Collegiate and Polytechnic Institute, and St. Francis College. The Pratt Institute School of Library Training was the second school in America founded to educate librarians. A Brooklyn newspaper reported that, “A class in library training is organized, not for comparative study at present, but for that of the methods of the Pratt Library.” At the time of its opening, 4 January 1888, the Pratt Free Library was Brooklyn's only public library. Consequently,
this early venture in library education, conceived to train library staffers, evolved into a library school with students enrolled from all over the country.  

Pettee came to Brooklyn in 1894, her twenty-first year, to train for a career in librarianship, an emerging field in an era when libraries still were defining their mission and evolving into cultural and educational institutions. The Pratt Institute School of Library Training had been founded four years earlier, “to supply the need of trained workers for its own staff as [sic] also in response to a demand from other libraries for trained assistants.”

Graduation picture, Pratt Library School Class of 1897. Courtesy of the Pratt Institute Archives, Brooklyn.
Pettee lived in Clinton Hill, a fashionable neighborhood whose “leisurely pace was typified by pram-pushing-ladies-and not even a horseless carriage marred the scene.” Schools, churches, and lecture halls helped to make it a stimulating cultural center that boasted newly built apartment buildings, Pratt Free library, and Pratt Institute. Brownstones exemplified the Romanesque design of rock-faced and smooth-faced stone with Roman brick and terra cotta, while other buildings exhibited Renaissance-inspired designs, neo-Renaissance facades, and “such forms as cartouches, foliate piers, pedimented doorways, swags and classical mouldings.”

Soon after settling in, she wrote to her parents about her life as a student at the library school:

Mama’s letter just came to night and I was glad to get it for I was quite disappointed when I came home from Pratt. Miss Avery one of our teachers has a course ticket to lectures at the Brooklyn Institute and as she doesn’t have time to go herself has offered the use of it to members of the Library class. These lectures are something fine often given by the greatest lecturers in the country and tonight I had set my heart on going to hear Olive Thorne Miller lecture on birds—but another girl got the ticket first and wanted to take her mother ahead of me (one ticket admits two). I felt provoked about it for the ticket was given to the Library girls and not all their [sic] relations outside....Sunday I went to hear Dr. Abbot at Plymouth Church. I was much surprised to find Mr. Beechers old church so plain and homily [sic]. It is a great square red brick barn like building with no ornamentation what ever. I would never have taken it for a church but might think it a fine company’s quarters or something of the sort. The church was so full and the people kept coming & coming in and making such a continual disturbance I could not catch half of his fine sermon.

The other boarder here or one of them (there are three) is an Episcopalian [?] is going to the church. I went the first Sunday I came. This church is very aristocratic one of the finest churches in the city in fact and I prefer a smaller church below here but their is a little pleasanter not to go alone. In the church below St. Marks (perhaps I told you) there are to be a series of lectures on the reformation which I want to attend. They are in the evening but they say it is quite proper for a young lady to go out unattended in the evening to lectures or any place like this. I think I’ll go this week though I hated to go alone last Fri night and so staid [sic] at home.

Churches provided acceptable social activities for single women at the close of the nineteenth century, and in Brooklyn, “the city of churches,” their abundance of lectures and sermons rivaled the popularity of programs of other cultural
institutions. Gifted pastors attract followings, as did the Reverend Lyman Abbott, the pastor of Plymouth Congregational Church after Henry Ward Beecher’s death in 1887. Plymouth was known as Beecher’s church, and it was difficult for Abbott to assimilate to his new position. In his autobiography, he cited the *Boston Advocate*’s unfavorable comparison of him with his famous predecessor:

> Though totally lacking in that gift of well-nigh magical eloquence which for forty years astonished and thrilled and held spellbound the packed thousands in that Brooklyn meeting-house, though having none of that personal magnetism, that intuitive knowledge of human nature, that all-creative imagination, which made their former pastor the pulpit phenomenon of his time, it may be found that he upon whom that prophet’s mantle has fallen is destined to do a work as great and exert an influence no less widespread and abiding.⁶

However, by the time Julia Pettee visited Plymouth Church in October 1894, Abbott was well-established. She remembered 1894-1895 as a happy year: “Lyman Abbott was preaching in Plymouth Church, and there was the great city of New York just across the River.” An image emerged of a city congenial to a young woman with academic interests, and Julia Pettee fit this picture well.⁷

By the close of the nineteenth century, Brooklyn had developed a substantial literary and cultural life. Julia’s exposure to lectures at the Brooklyn Institute and in Brooklyn churches was a rewarding social experience and an opportunity to enjoy the wealth of intellectual pursuits the city sponsored. The Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences had long been part of the cultural life of Brooklyn. Incorporated as the Brooklyn Apprentices’ Library Association in 1824, it broadened its scope and changed its name in 1843: “For many years thereafter the Institute was a most important factor in the social, literary, scientific and educational life of Brooklyn.” This golden period lasted until 1867, when financial problems forced the Institute to curtail its programs. Not until 1887 was it free of debt and able to resume a place of importance in the educational enrichment of the citizens of Brooklyn. By the time Julia came to Brooklyn, the Institute operated successfully. In the 1894-95 season, “The number of members was increased from 3,457 to 3,764; the total number of lectures, conferences, class exercises and Department meetings was 2,621, as against 2,212 in the previous year.” The varied offerings during the year of Julia’s residence ranged from a course on the literature and religion of India to addresses on American literature, including one by Julia Ward Howe, to the program on birds that Julia complained about missing in her letter to her parents.⁸

During Pettee’s first weeks at Pratt, the *Brooklyn Citizen* noted a meeting of the Brooklyn Literary Union, the opening of the Brooklyn Art School, and a meeting of the Brooklyn Woman’s Club. Although she took full advantage of Brooklyn’s cultural stimulation, Julia focused on her library work, which proved
You can’t imagine how busy we are. I get up about seven and
dress pick up my room etc before breakfast which comes at
eight. Then after eating it we put up our lunch. Miss Walkins
and I put ours up together. Then hurry off to Pratt. Then from
nine till one we have four lectures. At one o’clock [sic] we have
an hour or as much of it as we can afford to take to eat our lunch
and then something the rest of the after noon till dark. This
afternoon it was stenography and type writing. The principles
of shorthand are very simple but it takes any amount of practice
[sic] to get the characters fixed in your head. We have already
had several lessons in cataloguing book [sic] and it is positively
amazing how much their is to it. You would be surprised
to find how much red tape there is in simply giving out a book
in a large Library like Pratt’s where there are 50,000 vols and
sometimes 1,000 are borrowed in a single day. I received my
Library card tonight and I was borrower No. 24,927.9

During her year at Pratt, her correspondence with parents and friends furnish
a personal account of the community where she lived, studied, and took a keen
interest in public affairs. In her own words, she aspired to become “more of a
woman, and more what a woman ought to be—ready to enter upon those new
fields of activity which providence [was] plainly opening for all who [had] heads,
hands, and hearts.” Her letters about housing, the condition of labor, churches,
politics, and the intellectual environment reflected her willingness to savor the
intellectual and scholarly benefits of living in Brooklyn.10

The Brooklyn Street Railway strike of 1895, also known as the “war of the
trolleys,” which pitted labor against management, evoked Pettee’s feminist
sympathy for the “weaker side,” comparable to woman’s struggle for equal access
to education and employment. The strike resulted in the calling of the militia and
the breakdown of the transit system, then consisting of an elevated railway in
addition to trolleys serving the more remote areas lacking elevated service. The
strike had an immediate impact on residents of Brooklyn, many of whom relied on
trolleys every day, especially working people in low-rent, outlying sections like
Coney Island, East New York, and Newtown. As one reporter described it:

There are forty-eight trolley railway lines in Brooklyn, most of them operated nominally by different companies, but all grouped under the leadership of the Brooklyn Railroad Company for the purposes of the struggle with their employees [sic]. These comprise an army of 500 men, including conductors, motormen, and workmen in the electrical power plants. They presented to the companies at the beginning of the year the demands that ten hours should constitute a day’s labor, that every man should be allowed to leave his car long enough to eat
luncheon, and the wages should be advanced from $2.25 a day. These the employers refused to grant.  

The strike began Monday morning, 14 January 1895, when more than six thousand men stopped work and the owners hired scabs to run the trolleys. Strikers honored trolleys carrying U.S. mail, but objected to running the cars for any other purpose. The assistant U.S. attorney decided that only government mail cars would be protected, which eventually induced owners to request military protection from the mayor and the police force. On the evening of 18 January, the mayor called out the Second Brigade of the National Guard, numbering three thousand men. A contemporary account reported that, “The strike was pretty well broken up after Mayor Charles A. Schieron of Brooklyn ordered out the militia. They took possession of the car barns and of almost everything.”  

In a letter to her more conservative cousin, Julia took a feminist, pro-labor stance on the strike:

I was quite delighted to have your opinions on the strike so fully expressed because they do not coincide with mine and I like to be a little disputatious some times...[W]e look at it from quite different objective points. You are inclined to see the question from the capitalists standpoint...I from the laboring men’s...perhaps because I always feel as most women do an innate sympathy for the weaker side. 

In Brooklyn...public sympathy is undoubtedly with the strikers though the editorials undoubtedly of the two leading papers read as if they [were] under the direct supervision of the corporations. Even the New York Tribune admits of the justice of the strikers claims. The point at issue is not as I thought you intimated the advance of .25 per day claimed be promised them by the corporations and which they considered an 8 per cent dividend on matured stock justified. They carried this demand at the very beginning and only insisted that...they be not required to work more than the 10 hrs within 12 without extra pay also prohibited by a state statute.  

Julia was different from many college educated women of her generation, who, after attending college, returned home to assume domestic responsibilities for the family that had released them from four years of household obligations. Instead, she continued the independent life she enjoyed in Brooklyn, participating in social activities available to single women of her era. In spring 1895 she graduated from Pratt and joined the sparse ranks of newly trained librarians in a profession just starting to open for women. Because education and the moral improvement of society were goals of American libraries, women, with their supposedly nurturing qualities, were considered well-suited for the profession. Reminiscing about her
year at Pratt, Julia wrote:

At that date the only opening for women to earn a livelihood was by teaching or in domestic service. A frustrating year in teaching had made me feel disqualified for that work and I must earn my own living...Pratt, always practically minded, recognized the coming need for trained library assistants in the new field of library work just opening up.”

The graduates of the Pratt library school became vital members of the intellectual communities of Brooklyn and New York. An 1899 Pratt publication reported that graduates of the program held positions in the Columbia College Library, the New-York Free Circulating Library, the Y.M.C.A Library in Brooklyn, the Aguilar Library in New York City, and Packer Institute, Brooklyn, among others. “[T]he school sends out young people capable of being private secretaries, or of taking positions in publishing-houses or in the libraries of daily papers and magazine-offices, of indexing books and periodicals, &c. “ The graduates of the school and the employees of the Pratt Free Library enjoyed outstanding reputations, praised because they “rarely missed a day and displayed very little of the dragged-out and dispirited look seen when people, especially women, are overworked.” With a staff of competent, devoted workers, the Pratt Free Library flourished, expanding services with a branch in the Astral apartment building.

The Astral Apartments on Franklin, India, and Java streets, Brooklyn, referred to by one reporter as “the most perfect type of an apartment in the world,” was one block from Manhattan Avenue, the principal business street in the community. The complex contained a well-lit, steam-heated lecture room on Java Street, measuring 39ft. x 40ft. x 14 ft., “handsomely furnished and well supplied with books and newspapers for the free use of tenants.” The space for the Astral branch library was acquired by Margaret Healy, the first director of the library school and the guiding force behind its establishment. Pettee evaluated Healy’s involvement with the Astral:

Miss Margaret Healy, a member of the Pratt family, during the year of her directorate of the School was interested in forming a social settlement in the depressed section of Greenpoint, Brooklyn. The philanthropic Pratt Brothers had recently erected a model six story apartment house in this vicinity, the model low rent apartment house in the city. In the spring Miss Healy persuaded six of the library students to go down with her and to occupy and live co-operatively in two of the apartments in order to estimate living expenses and to get acquainted with the neighborhood, preliminary to organizing both a social settlement and a branch library in the building.

As early as 1889, Healy informed Charles Pratt that, “The advantages of opening
it [the Astral library] to the public would be two-fold: that of radiating a helpful influence in all that portion of the city and secondly in stimulating within the Astral itself a healthy literary atmosphere.” In 1893 she asked the trustees of Pratt Institute to

grant to us the occupancy of the store in the Astral Building situated at the corner of Java and Franklin Streets. The Library has long felt the need of a work-room at its Astral Branch which should supplement its present work. Up to this time all its supplementary work (such as reading and sewing-classes for the children) has been done in the library room, at a manifest disadvantage.”

The new branch also provided housing for some of the women attending Pratt’s library training school. Julia Pettee summarized life at the Astral to her parents:

Mrs. Webb is good to all her boarders and I should hate very much to leave her for the cooperative housekeeping. Bee is going to try it with a Quaker girl. They have rented three rooms in [sic] the 4th floor—but if she comes home with an armful of books for evening “recreation” as tired out as I do nights she’ll not have much ambition to go to work and cook her supper and in the morning find it quite as hard to get up and hurry the breakfast and house work out of the way. That’s my public opinion privately expressed. That’s housekeeping in the Astral Flats I’m afraid.

The Astral was among the locations that provided space for the educational programs and lectures in which Julia participated while living in Brooklyn. Pratt Library also introduced her and other students from outside the metropolitan area to cultural institutions in Brooklyn and New York environs: “A series of routes for sight-seeing is made out for them, with the days and hours of opening of various galleries and museums, and a list of lunch-rooms and restaurants that may be visited by ladies without escort.”

Julia took a keen interest in public affairs in Brooklyn. In November 1894 she discussed the political climate from a progressive, anti-Tammany standpoint consistent with her feminist, pro-labor attitude she toward the trolley strikers the following year:

Tuesday is election day and I suppose it will be all excitement at the polls, for you know the Constitutional amendments are to be voted on, Hill as a candidate for governor defeated, and Tammany Hall doomed forever. I suppose they will vote in Conn. but I am so interested in N.Y. politics I forget my own
General discontent with economic conditions added tension to the campaign. Not only did voters faced with industrial and economic problems look for change in the state government, but the historic referendum on the consolidation of New York City gave special importance to the election. In the soon-to-be-borough of Brooklyn, many citizens objected to losing municipal independence and voted against the measure, but the creation of Greater New York was approved in Kings County by the narrow margin of 277 votes, 64,744 to 64,467, and went into effect on 1 January 1898. 9

The gubernatorial race by the Tammany candidate, U.S. Senator David B. Hill, was another critical issue. Because the ticket ignored the reform wing, many Brooklyn Democrats did not support the organization's slate. Julia Pettee, characteristically opposed to machine politics, Tammany style, and supported the Republican, Levi P. Morton, whose party contrasted what it viewed as Hill's negative record with its new policy for the protection of working people. Elected governor of New York with 673,818 votes compared with Hill's 517,710, Morton presided over the organization of Greater New York and the reform of the civil service system. However, the setback to Tammany Hall was only temporary: after consolidation, it allied itself with the Democratic organizations in outlying boroughs, especially Brooklyn, and regained its power in subsequent decades. 20

The year Julia Pettee spent in Brooklyn prepared her for the independent road she took when deciding her life's work. After completing the library training program at Pratt, she studied and worked at Vassar College. Supporting herself by working as assistant to the cataloguer, she met her college expenses and earned her A.B. degree in 1899. Her outstanding professional skill resulted in her employment at the Vassar College Library:

It would be a great advantage to retain Miss Pettee as a permanent salaried assistant. She has chosen librarianship as her profession, is qualified admirably to take an excellent position in any library as trained cataloguer besides rendering valuable aid in other branches of the work. With her services in addition to the transient force of students, the Library would be permanently satisfactorily equipped.

Julia worked ten years at Vassar as a cataloguer, while spending her summer vacations working at several different libraries. According to a report,

The further recommendation is also made to have Miss Pettee put henceforth on the footing of instructor, with title of cataloguer instead of assistant. She has earned this and deserves it. She is recognized among librarians as being exceedingly competent, is called upon to organize and start new libraries, and besides possesses considerable library ability useful in our work. She has written articles of note for the Library Journal.
and Vassar Miscellany, and has lectured by invitation more than once at Pratt Institute Library School and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{21}

Her spreading reputation and her special interest in cataloguing religious materials led to her being hired to reorganize the libraries both of Rochester Theological Seminary and Union Theological Seminary in New York City. After her retirement she became a consultant in religion to the Yale University Library. She died at the age of ninety-five, after spending her final years researching the early history of Salisbury, Connecticut.

Pettee’s training at Pratt prepared her well for her chosen career. Her year in Brooklyn introduced her to new experiences, the development of self-reliance, and an affinity for progressive causes. Her significant contributions to the history and culture of American libraries are lasting tributes to Julia Pettee’s intelligence, training, and commitment to democracy.

NOTES


5. Julia Pettee to her parents, 9 October 1894 (Pratt Institute Archives, hereafter cited as PIA).


8. Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, \textit{The Seventh Year Book of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1894-5} (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1895), 75, 77, 86, 106, 107, 254.

9. \textit{Brooklyn Citizen}, 3, 7, 9 October 1894; Pettee to her parents.


17. Pettee to her parents; Franklin W. Hooper, “The Brooklyn Institute of the Arts and Sciences,” *Lend a Hand* 15 (1895), 193; see also “The Free Library as a Factor in the Social Movement,” written for the Library of Congress meeting in Chicago, 13 June 1893, in Pratt Institute Monthly 2 (September 1893-June 1894), 10; “The Pratt Institute Free Library Training Classes” (De Vinnie Press, 1893), 5.

18 Pettee to her mother, 5 November 1894, PIA.

