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Given a Bad Rap: The Women of Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism

Cornelia S. King, Curator of Women's History, Library Company of Philadelphia

[Opening image -- 1]

As Curator of Women's History at the Library Company of Philadelphia, I promote the study of women's history in a large general collection. The Library Company was founded by Benjamin Franklin and his friends in 1731, and it now contains over 500,000 volumes and 100,000 graphics. Until the mid-20th century, its mission was to serve the reading needs of its members. But it has always been open to the public, and thus we can make the claim that it is the nation's first successful public lending library. In the middle of the 20th century, it became a research library, and now mainly serves academic scholars, K-12 educators, and public historians.

[Show research guide image -- 2]

In the 1970s, the staff examined the collection closely to identify material that would support the study of African Americana. Today, many exhibitions, publications, conferences, and public lectures later, it's the African Americana that puts the Library Company on the map for many people. And it's the Program in African American History that serves as the model for the Library Company's other programs. Much of what I do as the Curator of Women's History involves identifying material already in the collection, and bringing it to the attention of researchers.

((Since there are academics in the audience, let me be sure to say that the Library Company offers fellowships both for Ph.D. students and for post-docs – and we are very, very proud of the many excellent historical studies that have resulted in part from research in our reading rooms.))

But a huge part of what the Library Company does today is digital. Many of our staff meetings focus on how the Library Company can “increase its

digital footprint.” And if we do an exhibition in our gallery, it’s the show’s afterlife in digital form that has the lasting impact.

So ... today I’d like to examine the question: Should the Library Company create an exhibition on 19th-century Spiritualism, and if it were to do so, what form should it take?

- Should we do a full gallery experience, with tie-in events, publications, and an online afterlife? (As it were)
- Or a one-case pop-up exhibit, to spotlight a handful of items?
- Or an on-line only exhibit – possibly done by an intern?
- Or occasional postings on Facebook or the Library Company’s blog?
- Or simply do fuller cataloging to increase the likelihood that researchers will be able to locate material? Now I say “simply” – but if there are any catalogers here, you know how much time and energy goes into full cataloging. And everyone knows that all of it involves metadata – even if the metadata is just one well-worded caption.

Also ... should we choose material on the basis of its visual appeal? For a curator of exhibitions that’s a no-brainer. Visual appeal has to be a factor. The best item for an exhibition may not be the best item for the researcher studying the same topic in the reading rooms.

And ... if we want mass appeal ... does that affect how the subject is presented? As Curator of Women’s History for the Library Company’s Program in Women’s History, one of my guiding principles is to recognize and honor women for who they were in their historical moment. So ... if the subject is Spiritualism, is it wrong, for example, to play up the “spookiness” of séances?

With that in mind, let’s consider the Library Company’s exhibition “That’s So Gay: Outing Early America,” which I curated in 2014.

[Start clip from video -- 3]

The title I chose was deliberately provocative. But I was very careful not to say that the people who lived in the late-18th and the 19th centuries were gay. After all, words like “lesbian” and “homosexual” as labels to identify people by sexual preference first came into the language in the 20th century. In fact, the big challenge was to present early same-sex relationships and the culture in which they flourished in a way that represented their moment and not our own. I showed that same-sex relationships didn’t just flourish in the 19th century; they were hallmarks of good character in what I called the “homosocial fabric of culture.” And schoolgirl smashes, David-and-Jonathan relationships, and Boston marriages were just a little farther along on the same continuum.

And I’m proud to say the show was a blockbuster. We had record-breaking attendance. All in all, it exceeded my wildest expectations. But the title “That’s So Gay.” Did it go too far? Obviously, since I chose it, I don’t think it did. But I’d be interested to know what other people think.

And now, today, in the aftermath, I’m thinking about 19th-century Spiritualism, and its potential as a topic for a future project. The Library Company’s collection includes about 250 books on Spiritualism, most of them acquired at the time of publication. Our 19th-century staff created a new category for “Modern Spiritualism” to distinguish these books from books on alchemy, astrology, fortune-telling, demonology, and so forth. Frankly we’re lucky – they were far cheaper in the 19th century than they are on today’s antiquarian market!

So let me say a few words about American Spiritualism.

[Show pamphlet – 4]

Most historians trace its origin to the spring of 1848. At the time, John Fox, his wife, and their daughters Margaret and Kate were living in a farmhouse in western New York State. After “mysterious” noises were heard in the girls’ bedroom, first their mother, then their neighbors, and soon thousands of people came to believe that the girls were able to communicate with spirits of the dead.

That's a pamphlet from the Library Company's core collection ... that was published in 1848, when the rappings were first getting attention. I'd hate to have to try to buy that today.

As Ann Braude noted in her excellent 1989 book *Radical Spirits*, Spiritualism became a significant religious movement, with its roots in Quakerism. For many of the early believers, Spiritualism represented direct knowledge and individual sovereignty. The most radical believers rejected orthodox religion because of its top-down structure, and also opposed slavery, capital punishment, appropriation of Indian lands, and traditional man-woman relationships. In other words, they rejected all types of usurpation of autonomy as unjust.

Thus, to be a medium and to communicate with the spirits of the dead could be radically anti-authoritarian, much like Transcendentalism. But Transcendentalism mainly appealed to an elite, well-educated Northern base, while Spiritualism had a much broader constituency. Contemporary estimates suggest that as many as twenty million people embraced Spiritualism in the mid-19th century. And one of those people famously was the First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln, when she was grieving the death of the Lincolns' son Willie in 1862.

Other aspects of Spiritualism had less to do with mourning the dead. Many people considered Spiritualism to be like scientific experimentation.

[Show t.p. -- 5]

To this way of thinking, Spiritualism would provide scientific evidence of religious truths, and thus reconcile religion with science. This was a very catchy idea, at a time when science – and especially technology – seemed to be heralding in a new age.

Note the metaphor in this periodical's title: *The Spiritual Telegraph*.

On the cover of this book, note the lines that suggest lightning bolts.

[Show cover -- 6]

I find it interesting that even in the afterlife, Franklin is associated with electricity. According to Illinois senator Thomas Richmond, Franklin's spirit spoke to him through a medium about the importance of Emancipation. Senator Richmond then conveyed these messages to Abraham Lincoln. In this 1870 book, *God Dealing with Slavery*, Richmond outlines how it was his letters to Lincoln that were instrumental in getting Lincoln to emancipate the slaves.

Other people also reported channeling the spirit of Benjamin Franklin. Through the medium Andrew Jackson Davis, Franklin claimed that the "electrical conditions" necessary for spirit communications are "mostly in America ... particularly Auburn and Rochester." That's in western New York State, where the Fox sisters got their start. But let me get back to Andrew Jackson Davis in a moment.

After all, my interest is in women's history. There is a long tradition of women seers and ecstasies, many of whom made pronouncements in trance states. Molly McGarry goes into this in her 2008 book *The Ghosts of Futures Past*. As she also points out, in the late 18th and into the 19th centuries, mesmerists staged events that typically featured a man working with a "mesmerized" female subject in performances that blurred the lines between entertainment, science, and magic.

What especially interests me is the more active role of women in American Spiritualism – at exactly the time when the women's rights movement was gathering significant momentum. The Fox sisters were first becoming known in spring 1848, and the Seneca Falls convention for women's rights was in July of the same year.

In the time remaining I'd like to look at a few of these women.

[Show Mary Fenn Davis - 7]

This is Mary Fenn Davis. In 1855, she up and divorced her husband in order to marry Andrew Jackson Davis, the man I was just mentioning. Thanks to Spiritualism, the two had discovered they were “harmonious.” Mary Fenn Davis’s ex-husband, citing an Indiana law prohibiting remarriage following divorce, charged the two with being Free-Love advocates. It was quite a scandal. But the Davises went on to become a power couple – collaborating as writers, editors, and lecturers promoting Spiritualism.

[Show Andrew Jackson Davis -- 8]

Here is Andrew Jackson Davis. Doesn’t he look like Michael Douglass? And don’t you love the title of this autobiography? Freud would have had a field day.

After the Fox sisters suddenly became celebrity mediums in 1848, it was this man who authenticated their powers. At the time, he himself was already famous as a clairvoyant and also a published author.

By the way, much later, in 1885, Davis managed to get his marriage to Mary Fenn Davis annulled. He did it in order to marry a much younger woman. He said he had “misinterpreted” the spirit messages thirty years previously. He even cited the same Indiana law that Mary Fenn Davis’s first husband cited. Sadly, the experiences of Mary Fenn Davis do not appear to support the fond hopes of the early radical proponents of Spiritualism. It would seem that the “equality” in the Davises’ marriage – based on their “harmony” – wasn’t a reality.

[Show Kate and Maggie Fox -- 9]

And of course the lives of the Fox sisters became difficult. As Marlene Tromp noted in her 2006 book *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism*, Spiritualism offered mediums such as the Fox sisters the opportunity for social climbing. But such disruptions often came at a price.

Both sisters struggled with alcoholism and poverty in later life. Maggie's story was especially tragic. As a young woman, she formed a relationship with the arctic explorer Elisha Kent Kane. And following his death, Kane's socially prominent Philadelphia family refused to recognize her as his widow. Then, in the 1880s, she told reporters that the rappings were basically a hoax the sisters were able to perpetrate by cracking the joints in their toes. This episode was followed by a retraction, with the sisters (including an older sister Leah) accusing each other of various indignities. Your basic media circus centering on women's foibles.

And many other mediums were charged with being frauds or charletans.

But I totally agree with Ann Braude's comment: "Americans **wanted** to talk to spirits, and they would have found a way to do it with or without Kate and Margaret Fox."

But, in summary ... in case you haven't noticed ... my initial enthusiasm has cooled a bit. My show – tentatively titled "Reading Spiritualism: Looking for a New Age in 19th-Century America" – doesn't look quite as promising as I had hoped.

The topic is very interesting, with much resonance with contemporary social issues. It relates directly to women's history, and the secondary literature is extensive, and very, very good. But this minute, I'm not sure the world needs a full-scale exhibition on the history of Spiritualism. And it's been terrifically hard to find visually compelling material. I've done some Facebook posts and two small pop-up exhibitions at the Library Company. I've also upgraded the cataloging records for material on Spiritualism, and acquired a dozen or so items, both books and also photographs, to add to the collection.

[Show screenshot from ImPAC – 10]

Plus I've added records to our digital assets catalog for the portraits of women spiritualists that I've found in the collection.

And also discussed a new acquisition in a blog posting I wrote:

[Show screenshot from blog – 11]

I do think that the history of Spiritualism should be incorporated into American social history more, and especially into women's history – for a fuller understanding of 19th-century America. I'd want more people to know that Spiritualism was a respected and pervasive belief system – not something a few possibly-demented mourners clung to in their grief. But I also think that the women of American Spiritualism got a bad rap. Many of them were looking for a new age, with more sovereignty for women, but what they got was the same old patriarchal system. Sadly for them it was still a man's world, with fairly rigid social stratification.

So ... I will be very interested to hearing reactions from you folks.

[Show opening image again -- 1]

Including ... what do you think of my font? (It's called DHF Story Brush Slanted.)