Sara Yorke Stevenson: The First Women at the University

In 1888, when Sara Yorke Stevenson was forty-one, William Pepper delivered a speech on the higher education of women. In concluding, he peered into a future which was still only obscurely perceived by most of his contemporaries:

It were idle to speculate on the ultimate result of the constantly increasing share taken by American women in practical life. It does not concern us of this generation that at some distant day the franchise may be extended to them. This question cannot now be regarded as a practical one. . . . Nor does it concern us that at some distant day, when this continent is densely peopled, the struggle for existence may be all the more keen and severe because our women have been trained, as far as may prove possible, to be the intellectual peers of men.¹

Six years later, in 1894, Sara Yorke Stevenson became the first woman to receive an honorary degree at the University of Pennsylvania. In recognition of her contributions to scholarship and her administration of the University's archaeological collections that led to the establishment of the University Museum, she was awarded the degree of Doctor of Science. Between her birth in 1847 and 1920—the year she became an officer of the Légion d'Honneur at the age of seventy-three—Stevenson created a life for herself that already illustrated what Pepper regarded only as a possible development of the future. For, in the course of these years, a dramatic change was already taking place in the status of American women.

The modest gains made during this time by women at the University provide an interesting background to Stevenson's life and the influence she had on the University. Prior to Pepper's inaugural, women had already gained access to certain courses of study at the University. If the ranks of those genuinely interested in promoting female education were thin at the time, a number of professors showed enlightened self-interest by their willingness to increase their income by accepting female students. When a clergyman who was an alumnus of the University proposed a faculty of music in 1874, the idea met with the approval of Provost Stillé and the trustees. A professor of music was elected the following year on the

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condition that he provide for his own salary from the sale of tickets—
including tickets for women—to his course. He was also expected to pay
for alterations necessary to the room in College Hall allotted to him.
According to Pepper, there were still “potent reasons” in 1893 which made
it necessary to exclude female undergraduates as a policy described as
“quite definite.” Despite such strictures, it was almost twenty years since
the department of music had opened its courses to “such persons . . . male
or female as may desire systematic instruction in this subject.” According
to the University’s historian writing in 1940, the reason for this departure
from custom was a “more adventurous spirit” which as it had led to the
creation of a new professorship, made it only natural for instruction in
music to be made available to both sexes. The fact remains, however, that
degrees had been granted to only six women at the University by the time
that Sara Yorke Stevenson received her honorary Sc.D. in 1894.

Not stopping to rest on her laurels, Stevenson continued her active,
creative life, and on the occasion of her seventieth birthday celebration in
1917 she was described as “the best-known woman in Philadelphia.” Her
work as a scholar and as an administrator which had been acknowledged by
the University so many years before may have helped to modify Pepper’s
initially ambivalent opinion on the education of women. It was certainly
through her efforts that he became an active supporter of the ambitious
project for a splendid new museum to house the University’s archaeological
collections.

At a time when the University was expanding in many directions,
William Pepper had recognized the importance to higher education of
current archaeological discoveries. A strong program of Semitics was
established under Morris Jastrow, Jr., a graduate of the College who in 1886
became the first Jew to be a professor at the University in 1886.
Assyriology was introduced under Hermann V. Hilprecht in 1887, the year
that Pepper, along with other Philadelphians, subscribed funds to send an
archaeological expedition to Babylon. The conditions of the subscription
were that “all the collections secured shall be the property of the University
of Pennsylvania, provided suitable accommodation in a fire-proof building
is supplied.” The trustees accepted the proposal, and the expedition of
1889 to Nippur, headed by the Reverend John P. Peters, inaugurated the
first large-scale American archaeological excavation in the Near East.
Subsequent expeditions were led by John H. Hayes who “unflinchingly
faced the perils to which a cruel climate and turbulent, predatory tribes
daily exposed him.” In 1889, the Archaeological Association of the
University of Pennsylvania was founded, with Joseph Leidy as president
and Sara Yorke Stevenson as one of the founding members.

It is not clear when Stevenson first became interested in Egyptology,
which was to be her speciality as archaeology developed at the University.
Her cousin, Admiral Edward Yorke Macauley, had served in the Far East, and perhaps through him she became interested in the discoveries of William Flinders-Petrie, the English excavator, who had found remains of other cultures in the soil of Egypt. Her first article, entitled "Mr. Petrie's Discoveries at Tel-el-Amarna," appeared in 1880 when she was thirty-three, and she returned to the same subject sixteen years later in an address before the American Philosophical Society. At the time of the earlier publication, she had been married for ten years to a Philadelphia attorney. But, until the age of twenty-one when she took up residence in the city at the home of an aunt and two elderly uncles, Sara Yorke had led a peripatetic existence. Her childhood was divided between France and America, and she also lived for five years in Mexico where she witnessed the brief, disastrous career of the Emperor Maximilian. She later related her Mexican experiences in a book.

Stevenson's earliest contact with the artifacts of antiquity had been as a child in the home of a connoisseur and collector who became her guardian when she was sent from America to attend school in Paris, the city of her birth. By the time she left France for Mexico at the age of fifteen, she had acquired an interest in the priceless possessions belonging to her guardian as well as a command of French which affected the inflection of her English throughout her life. An enduring affection for France led her to organize relief for that country during World War I, a service for which she received decorations from France and America in 1920. "Elle était brave, la citoyenne Stevenson," commented the novelist Owen Wister, when he succeeded her as president of the Alliance Française.

On the death of her father, which followed shortly after the Mexican debacle, Sara Yorke at eighteen was faced with the alternatives of going to live with relatives or becoming a governess—a move at the time tantamount to a lowering of social status. She was personally acquainted, therefore, with the hardships endured by women of restricted means in a period when they had few sanctioned ways of supporting themselves. In later life, she became the president of the Philadelphia Exchange for Women's Work—an organization which enabled indigent women to earn a pittance by their labors without being exposed to social opprobrium. She herself had little choice in her decision to come to Philadelphia, but she seems to have fitted in very well with the life of her elderly relatives and their social circle. Sara Yorke made her entry in 1868, unannounced, on foot, and at midnight, after a number of fortuitous events had turned a journey from Brattleboro into something of an adventure. By this time, however, she was more than accustomed to strange voyages: in 1862, she and a chaperone had been the only women aboard the ship which sailed from St. Nazaire in France, bound for Mexico and French intervention there. Five years later, when the women of the family were advised to leave, they departed with the first
French army from Vera Cruz and spent three weeks at sea on the way to New Orleans because the captain of the ship was unfamiliar with the Gulf.  

After her marriage to Cornelius Stevenson—two years after her arrival in Philadelphia—she contributed to the exuberant life led by his large family in Chestnut Hill. In Paris, she had studied both voice and dancing. Now, she not only sang contralto in a musical group but, as a contribution to the Centennial celebrations, taught a large group of young Philadelphians the minuet. The dance was performed on a grand scale in eighteenth century costume. As her young family grew up, she became involved in philanthropic work, and her interest in antiquity was also revived at this time by a meeting with Francis C. Macauley, a collector related to her cousin the Admiral and a friend and supporter of Pepper’s archaeological endeavors. A folklore society was formed which later developed into the Archaeological Society of the University of Pennsylvania and led directly to her involvement with the University’s Museum.

When the new University Library was completed in 1890, the growing archaeological collection overseen by Pepper was moved from its cramped quarters in College Hall, and the exhibition of objects excavated in Babylon or donated by Philadelphia patrons was arranged on the upper floors of the Library. Here, it continued to grow, owing in large part to Pepper’s encouragement and interest. The story is told of how an American woman warned a rich Mexican collector that the provost would be eager to obtain a certain priceless Moorish vase from him while on a visit to his country. The collector declared he would never part with it; some time later, the vase was nonetheless to be seen on display in the University Museum.  

Not surprisingly, the collection soon exceeded its bounds and started overflowing down the massive stairway of the Library. It became apparent that additional space would have to be found. Pepper was initially unwilling to add yet another large project to those for which he was already committed to raising contributions. Sara Yorke Stevenson had become honorary curator of the Egyptian section at the time that Pepper had raised money for establishing working relations with the Egyptian exploration fund. She now persuaded him that a museum was absolutely necessary to house the University’s valuable and diversified collection which could no longer be adequately displayed—or even stored. Soon won around, he went on to contribute to the building fund with his customary generosity.

Pepper’s unqualified respect for Stevenson contrasts strongly with his and his society’s ambivalence toward the educated woman in general and her role in the professions. The early history of the incursions made by women into programs restricted to men at the University of Pennsylvania, as at other places of higher learning, often involved their ability to take
The First Women Students
Left to right, Gertrude K. Peirce (1859-1953), Anna L. Flanigen (1852-1928), and Mary T. Lewis (1854-1952).
Admitted to classes in chemistry in the Towne Scientific School (1876), Gertrude Peirce and Anna Flanigen had both previously studied at Women’s Medical College. Flanigen obtained her Ph.D. in 1906 and became associate professor of chemistry at Mount Holyoke. Peirce was the first female graduate to marry an alumnus of the University, Francis H. Easby (A.B. 1881). Lewis received her certificate in 1880, after being admitted as a special student in the chemistry laboratory (1878-1880). In addition to enumerating her activities in the University records as those of “a busy minister’s wife & mother of a family with civic and philanthropic interests,” she stated her interest in “the movement for granting equal political rights and duties to women,” in which she worked with Susan B. Anthony. Together they brought about the establishment of a college for women at the University of Rochester.

advantage of the main chance—an ability which Stevenson’s life might be said to exemplify in the best possible sense. It was the objection of the lecturers to the clicking knitting needles of chaperones obliged to accompany the first young women to attend lectures at Oxford which led to acceptance there of women as a normal part of the student body. At the University of Pennsylvania, the trustees’ action in divesting themselves of the long-maintained charity schools for which they had been made responsible by the charter of 1749 seems to have benefited women. In 1876, at the very time that this action was being debated, the professor of chemistry, Frederick Genth, received an appeal from two graduates of Women’s Medical College in Philadelphia who wished to study with him. He chose to present their petition to the trustees after a visit to the University by the Emperor and Empress of Brazil. Their presence at the opening of the Centennial celebration had put the board in a particularly affable frame of mind.
The board’s agreement to allow Gertrude Klein Peirce and Anna Lockhart Flanigen to start classes in the Towne Scientific School in the fall of 1876 seems to have been influenced by the opportunity for some advantageous trading with the city. Having admitted a number of “indigent women” to classes at the University, the trustees felt better able to vote to abolish the historic charity schools the following year. The income which had supported them was immediately turned over to the newly named Towne School. Soon afterwards, the trustees authorized the admission of “such a number of female children in indigent circumstances, as they may deem expedient to lectures on History and to the instruction by lecture and in the laboratories in the Departments of Chemistry and Physics.” By this time, Peirce and Flanigen were already enrolled in their courses as fee-paying students. Clearly, if indigent female scholars were now acceptable on campus, others willing and able to pay tuition could no longer be neglected. The board went on to resolve, therefore, “that any other females desiring to attend instruction in the aforesaid subjects may do so on payment of a fee to be settled by the committees.”

On finishing their chemistry studies, Peirce and Flanigen were awarded, not a degree, but the certificate of proficiency specified at the same trustees’ meeting. No disgrace to their class, these first alumnae placed second and third in their final year. The first woman to earn a degree was another graduate of Women’s Medical College who entered the auxiliary faculty of medicine when it was permitted to open its courses to women in 1878. For a short period, that department awarded the Ph.D. to graduate physicians after a further two-year medical program. When she completed her coursework in 1880, Mary Alice Bennett thus became the first woman to receive a doctorate at the University. The degree was subsequently reduced to a Bachelor of Science. Because of this change in University policy, Emma Virginia Boone, yet another graduate of Women’s, was awarded a B.S. in 1891 for an identical course of study and became the first woman to receive an undergraduate degree.

In the catalogue of 1888–89, the name of Emily L. Gregory, Ph.D., is listed as the lone fellow in biology. She was also the first woman to teach at the University of Pennsylvania—albeit without remuneration. Nothing in the “Catalogue and Announcements” of that year indicates the nature of her position. There is no other record at the University of the struggle of this schoolteacher who decided to go back to college, received her B.A. at the age of forty, and then went on to become one of the handful of women to teach in the male-dominated universities of the East. In her own account:

After fitting myself for doing advanced work in the science of botany, which I did by four years work in College at Cornell, followed up by four years work in universities abroad, I found to my surprise that there was little opportunity for me to teach in the grade for which I had prepared. There were places enough
for elementary work but this was not what I wished to do. Through my acquaintance with the botanists of Penn. University I went there to finish a piece of original work which required the advantages of a laboratory to accomplish. I went there in June and during the summer there were several applications from women students, the faculty of the bio. dept. decided to take these students provided I would be willing to remain through the year and give my course of lectures which I had prepared for the first year. As the class was small and my lectures were already prepared, I was very glad to accept this proposition, as I had spent just ten years of my mature life to prepare myself for a grade of teaching which my unfortunate sex prevented my obtaining in the regular way. During the year, a number of my friends made a strong effort to have my work recognized in some way by the authorities of the institution. They were not able to accomplish this, however, in any other way than to obtain a reluctant consent to my receiving the title of fellow. This was granted in some regular meeting of the Trustees but the only advantage arising from it was that it enabled the Faculty of the Biological Dept. to print my name on the list with the faculty of that dept. 15

Gregory went on to teach at Columbia, at first without pay. She finally gained recognition in 1895 when she became professor of botany at Barnard College, but she died two years later at the age of fifty-six.

Another energetic pioneer in female education at the University of Pennsylvania was Caroline Burnham Kilgore, the first woman to graduate from the law school. She finally received her LL.B. in 1883, some twelve years after she had originally sought admission. On that occasion, her application had led the dean to threaten to resign if a woman was admitted. Orphaned at the age of twelve, Carrie Burnham had been put to work in the kitchen and the family factory by her guardians who considered that she “clearly had education enough for a woman.”16 She supported herself by teaching and domestic work while continuing her education, and in 1864 she became the first woman to earn the degree of Doctor of Medicine in the State of New York.

After arriving in Philadelphia where she took charge of a “French School for Young Ladies,” she made application to the law school in 1871. Some time before, she had started to study privately with attorney Damon Y. Kilgore who was to become her husband. On the occasion of their marriage, the parties entered into an “ante-nuptial contract” in which it was stated that she should “not be subject to any of the legal disabilities imposed upon married women by the laws of this Commonwealth, or of any State or Territory of the United States.”17 Carrie Burnham Kilgore finally gained admission to the law school in 1881. The same year, she argued the case for admitting women to the legal profession before a joint session of the state legislature, and a bill forbidding exclusion to the bar on the basis of sex was subsequently passed. Kilgore became the

Emily Lovira Gregory (1841–1897)
Born in Portage, New York, Gregory taught school until, at the age of thirty-five, she entered Cornell University (B.A. 1881). After obtaining her doctorate in botany at Zurich, she took the position of teaching fellow in the department of biology at the University of Pennsylvania, thus becoming the first woman to teach on the faculty as well as one of the earliest to give instruction at any but a women’s college. She was appointed lecturer at Barnard College the second year of its existence, and she played an active part in championing the cause of graduate students and encouraging laboratory assistants by paying them out of her own funds. She died only two years after becoming the first woman professor at Barnard College.
first woman admitted to practice before the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.

In 1881 also, women sought admission to the medical department as well as to the College. They were equally unsuccessful in each case. The medical faculty supported a motion by Alfred Stillé, brother of the former provost, pronouncing it inexpedient to admit women. Policy against female undergraduates reflected a hesitancy on the part of the University to accept the responsibility of comporting itself *in loco parentis* in the case of young girls, while the decision of the medical department was certainly due in large part to a prudish contemporary reaction to the immodesty and embarrassment of conducting medical lectures and clinical studies before both sexes. Among its heirlooms, the Medical College of Pennsylvania (formerly Women’s Medical College) preserves a cardboard mannequin formerly used for studying the male anatomy. During Philadelphia’s Bicentennial celebrations, it was exhibited as a curiosity—so far has women’s education come since the time of Pepper’s speech on the subject in 1888.

Towards the end of his inaugural address seven years before, William Pepper had broached the question of higher education for women with the admission that “it seems impossible for any school which intends at the present time to exert its full influence in the intellectual life of the community to neglect the subject.” The University was hampered, however, in making any marked contribution by the firm belief expressed in Pepper’s following remarks: “I regard it as settled beyond dispute that the co-education of the sexes is inadmissible.” To some degree, he reflected the views of a century before, when the trustees had justified their attempt to renege on the charter provisions for educating girls at the Charity School in the following manner: “It is unbecoming and indecent to have Girls among our Students; it is a Reproach to our Institution, and were our Funds able to support them, as they are not, they should be removed to another Part of the City.”

In 1764, as in Pepper’s time, financial considerations thus accompanied current prejudices against coeducation. The girls’ school survived attempts to discontinue it in the eighteenth century, and, in his address, Pepper went on to express interest in any developments in female education as long as it was clear that the University could not “take the initiative” and would do no more than watch from the wings. As far as the cost of a program for women was concerned, it was obvious that University officials had no intention of exerting themselves to generate the funds for this particular purpose. Expense was the factor on which the question of facilities for female education ultimately hinged. For this reason, it was deemed “proper that further action should await the expression of some carefully matured wishes or plans on the part of those who may be assumed to represent the interests of women in this matter.” Both funds and initiative would have to come from outside the University.
Among those both interested and in a position to do something about it were various prominent people who contributed to funds for women at the University. In 1878, scholarships for women planning to be teachers were provided for by Mrs. Bloomfield Moore. A benefaction earmarked for women was made by Colonel Joseph M. Bennett—no relation of Mary Alice Bennett—who donated two buildings to “be occupied for the purpose of a College of Women.” When no further funds were forthcoming, the premises became instead the administrative offices and social center for the graduate department of women, established in 1892. Its first director, Fanny R. M. Hitchcock, who had studied in Berlin before receiving her Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania, attempted to establish undergraduate courses for women in the arts and sciences. When her proposals were turned down, once more on the grounds of inadequate funds, she resigned. The graduate department did not long survive her departure. As for courses at the college level, despite its ever-growing body of alumnae, the University did not establish a true undergraduate course for women, as opposed to a curriculum designed for teachers, until 1933. Up until this time, the greatest changes in the policy towards women were those which occurred under the administrations of Stillé and Pepper.

However grudging early attempts to extend the privilege of higher education to women may appear in retrospect, they have to be viewed against the background of the times. Pepper’s forceful opinion was undoubtedly conventional; nonetheless, he showed considerable insight into the implications of female education, while steadily opposing the admission of women undergraduates to the University of Pennsylvania. Indeed, the interest of rich women such as Mrs. Moore seems to have encouraged Pepper to give more thought to the subject. In his remarks on the higher education of women in 1888, he went out of his way to counter the popular opinion that education harms a woman’s health—a claim which had caused Philadelphia’s great medical authority, University trustee S. Weir Mitchell, to warn parents that girls could not hope to graduate from Bryn Mawr without becoming permanent invalids.21

Pepper’s speech draws attention to the poor conditions under which the female usually received her education and the fact that ill health was equally prevalent among young women engaged in a number of occupations which no one thought to oppose. “Have you followed any large number of girls, drawn from the same class of society,” he asks, “into occupations which do not tax the brain by study—into the shops, the mills, the factories—where, as a rule, the neglect of hygienic rules is no less striking? The ill-health may there assume other forms, but ill-health and stunted development there are in sad plenty.” No efforts having been made to improve the deplorable surroundings in which girls are obliged to pursue their studies, Pepper suggests, “that judgment shall be suspended until for girls who are pursuing a higher education there are provided facilities as

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Carrie Burnham Kilgore (1838–1909)
First woman to gain admission to the law school and to receive the LL.B. (1883). Born in Vermont, orphaned at twelve, she financed her own education by teaching and domestic work. Admitted to the Bellevue Hospital clinics, she became the first woman to receive a medical degree in the State of New York (1865). In Philadelphia she taught in a “French School for Young Ladies” and began studying law with Damon Kilgore, whom she married after entering into an “ante-nuptial contract” with him. After graduating from the law school she was admitted to the Orphans’ Court of Philadelphia and to the state Supreme Court and all the lower courts after an act of the legislature (1885), whom she had addressed on the admission of women several years earlier. She was admitted to practice before the United States Supreme Court (1890). A year before her death she was the only woman passenger in the first balloon ascension of the Philadelphia Aeronautical Recreation Society.
adequate as those which have been created for young men.” As for women of his own social class who were traditionally prevented from pursuing higher studies, Pepper boldly asserts, “the amount of exertion connected with such lives as our young girls in society now lead is tenfold greater than all which can be charged against over-education.”

At that very moment, Sara Yorke Stevenson’s life was illustrating the amount of energy possessed by a woman “in society” where there was a call for her to use it. Stevenson’s unflagging enthusiasm for the University Museum collections resulted, in 1893, in an opportunity to gain attention for the University’s archaeological ventures at the Columbian Exposition, the World’s Fair in Chicago. The objects chosen for display testified to the vitality of the newly established department of archaeology and paleontology: far from being just artifacts from a collection, they had been acquired during the University’s own expeditions to the Middle East. On the same occasion, Sara Yorke Stevenson was appointed to the Jury of Awards for Ethnology of the department of anthropology at the exposition. A special act of Congress was needed in order to permit women to serve on such juries, after which she was promptly elected vice-president. At its final meeting, the international jury approved a resolution recognizing “the wisdom of Congress in passing an act which has enabled scientific women to take their place on the highest planes of science, co-equal with men.”

The following year saw the opening of the University Museum; Stevenson, formerly secretary of the committee to establish the Free Museum of Science and Arts, became the secretary of the board of the department of archaeology and paleontology, a position she held for a decade before being elected president for one year in 1904. At this date, two other women were engaged in the unheard-of activity of archaeological exploration under the Museum’s sponsorship. With funds provided by the Museum, Harriet Boyd was at work up the road from Sir Arthur Evans at Gournia on Crete. She was joined by Edith Hall, a Ph.D. from Bryn Mawr College, who later became curator of the Museum’s Mediterranean section and who, in 1912, discovered the Minoan settlement of Vrokastro in the mountains of eastern Crete. A number of enterprising women were employed by the Museum from its foundation, with Stevenson the first whose talents were recognized. She attained a high point in her career in 1894, the year when she first took up her post at the museum and was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University. From this moment on, “no new enterprise appeared to be undertaken . . . without her sanction. No distinguished visitors could be entertained without her. Neither could national or international conventions or congresses take place without including her as a member of the reception committee.”

Among her numerous activities—scientific, civic, and philanthropic—she was invited to be the first president of Philadelphia’s Civic Club,
established by a number of Philadelphia women to encourage municipal reform. In this role, she even figured in satirical verses in *Punch* as “Philadelphia’s patriotic matron.” Quoting the doggerel many years later, Stevenson commented, “all these good-natured criticisms make for publicity and publicity makes for interest.” In 1894, after delivering her first public lecture at the University of Pennsylvania, she became the first woman to lecture at Harvard’s Peabody Museum. She was appointed as the only woman to the board of trustees of Philadelphia’s Commercial Museum and, in subsequent years, she was the first woman to be called to a position on a citizen’s advisory committee by the mayor of Philadelphia. The all-male Oriental Club of Philadelphia changed its laws to admit her as a member, and she later became its president. In recognition of her great contributions, she was elected a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and a member of the American Philosophical Society.
When the governor of Pennsylvania appointed her commissioner to the Paris Exposition, she refused on the grounds that it was a political assignment. In 1897, however, she went to Europe as the special representative of the University’s department of archaeology and paleontology. On this occasion, she established cordial relations with English, French, and Italian archaeologists and secured treasures from a recent Egyptian excavation for the Museum. For the first and only time in her life, she actually traveled to Egypt in 1898 as a member of the American Exploration Society, a group she had founded the previous year. In Cairo she secured permission from the department of antiquities to explore Tanis and transport to Philadelphia sculptures found on the site.

After fifteen years of service to the University Museum, Stevenson resigned as president of the board in 1905. The following year, as a result of financial reverses, she launched upon an entirely new career as literary editor and columnist for the Philadelphia Public Ledger. Starting at the age of sixty-one, she contributed to a chronicle of events under the name of “Peggy Shippen” or, in a more serious vein, signing herself “Sally Wistar.” Never before or since has Philadelphia had a society columnist who was also the president of the prestigious Acorn Club. While working as a journalist, she continued to exhibit the researcher’s orderly mind. In a memorial speech at the University Museum in 1922, under the auspices of fourteen societies, schools, and organizations in which she had been active, the Honorable Hampton L. Carson gave an example of her quick intelligence: she had fully grasped the implications of a legal topic from a few hours spent among his own collection of papers. The result was a lucid Peggy Shippen letter on the growth of English law, of which he remarks: “Had she been specially interested in such matters she could not have done it more accurately, more intelligently or more thoroughly.”

An alumnus and professor of the law school and attorney general of the State of Pennsylvania, Carson was particularly interested in Stevenson’s writings on legal questions. In an illuminating tale, he discloses the casual source of an odd title listed along with her archaeological publications: “Insurance and Business Venture in the Days of Shakespeare and Those of William Penn.” It seems that an old insurance contract belonging to one of her uncles had awakened her interest in the terms of such documents, and she had proceeded to study those prepared in England and America and on the Continent. With her discovery that marine insurance was far from unknown in Italy in the days of Shakespeare, she added to what was generally regarded as the most comprehensive English authority on insurance law. To Carson, who speaks of Portia’s eloquence in The Merchant of Venice as “a strained literal interpretation, which a modern lawyer would not approve,” Stevenson’s contribution was of particular interest since it tended to refute the
assumption that Antonio did not have the option of insuring his ships—a
premise crucial for the entire plot of Shakespeare’s play. Her article was
published in a British legal journal and translated into more than a dozen
languages—no small accomplishment for a person with only an incidental
interest in the law.

In addition to her many intellectual accomplishments, Sara Yorke
Stevenson was, as her contemporaries were eager to insist, well versed in
the domestic arts. Not only did she entertain frequently in her house, but
she sometimes supplemented the efforts of her cook. She seems to have
been an innovator of recipes, serving, at one repast, a dish combining
“larded and browned sweetbreads, with broiled oysters and truffles—all
together.”25 She was also a needlewoman, and crewelwork in the style of
the Royal School of Needlework in South Kensington, designed and
executed in the early days of her marriage, adorned her drawing room at
237 South Twenty-first Street. In addition to being the first president of
the Equal Franchise Society of Pennsylvania and head of numerous
intellectual and cultural organizations she was, during the last eleven years
of her life, honorary president of the Philadelphia Branch Needlework
Guild of America. For all her academic accomplishment, it was important,
in those days, for her contemporaries, both men and women, to uphold her
as a model of accomplished Victorian womanhood. In the last year of her
life, when she was seventy-three, there was a ceremonial unveiling of her
likeness in a bas-relief by R. Tait McKenzie, whose statues of the young
Franklin, the Reverend George Whitefield, and ideal athletes adorn the
campus. At the ceremony, Stevenson was lauded by her contemporary, the
essayist Agnes Repplier, who declared: “She has been in her day president
of almost everything except the United States and the Women’s Christian
Temperance Union.”26 Most of all, she was the first of many talented
women to contribute extensively to life at the University of Pennsylvania
as students, teachers, trustees, alumnae, and friends.