

Mary Sheldon Barnes: An Educator's Life in Historical Context

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*The challenge of writing a historical biography is interesting from several perspectives. The writer primarily seeks to provide a clear picture of the subject without imposing personal biases. Maintaining an objective perspective becomes more difficult when deciding which material to include or exclude. This challenge became very evident when we began to write about Mary Sheldon Barnes. She was a leading educator at the end of the nineteenth century in the United States. It is easy to overlook her writing in educational history, but her impact on teaching methodology is present today in most classrooms. She was a pioneer because she included "sources" or pieces of original documents and pictures in her first textbook entitled *Studies in General History*. Her educational contributions have been blurred for several reasons which are explored in this research.*

Key Words: Barnes, object teaching, sources, Oswego, progressive, educator, Pestalozzi, Sheldon

Introduction

Mary Downing *Sheldon Barnes* was a leading historical methods educator in the later part of the nineteenth century. *Barnes* wrote several articles and books either alone or with her husband, Earl Barnes, about using primary source materials for students. She lived during an era in United States history in which education evolved from the common teaching practices of lecture and passive rote learning, to one in which academics encouraged students to

become more involved in the learning process (Crocco & Davis, 2002).

Barnes used a form of the educational methodology early childhood educator Johann *Pestalozzi* developed in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The concept she implemented was a process *Pestalozzi* called "object teaching." Other Pestalozzian scholars have used terms like "object methods, *object teaching*, objective method..." and these "appear to have been largely synonymous terms" (Barlow, 1977, p. 19). *Barnes's* father,

Edward Austin *Sheldon*, developed an American version of the methodology which he called “object” lessons.

Pestalozzi believed educators should begin a lesson using an object or a known, concrete concept and develop more abstract concepts using the known object. His beliefs also indicated that lessons should be child-centered, and each child’s context should be considered. As an example of this pedagogy, a writer named Edward R. Shaw observed one of Mary *Sheldon*’s classes on Roman history in 1884. The class began with a review from the previous day’s lesson. *Sheldon* then provided the class with primary source materials regarding Julius Caesar which included readings, pictures, and sketches. *Sheldon* next used a Socratic method of questioning her students about the information. At some point during the ensuing lesson, *Sheldon* moved into the background of the discussion and allowed the students to discuss the information. The lesson concluded with the class making what Mr. Shaw termed an “objective” analysis of the primary source material. When Mr. Shaw reviewed the lesson with Ms. *Sheldon*, he told her he thought she made an excellent point of bringing her students to the proper conclusion. Her response was “I am not making it, Mr. ____; it is making itself. I did not think it would come out this way. I’m glad, though, now it has” (Shaw, 1884, p. 133).

Mary *Sheldon*’s teaching methodology was highly influenced by her father and the early training she received both as a primary/secondary student and normal school student. Mary *Sheldon* began her teaching career at the early age of 19 when she graduated from *Oswego* Normal School, in *Oswego*, New York. She was a leading educational figure at a point in time in which pedagogical standards for history teaching were in transition. *Barnes*’ stature as a 19th century educator, although

significant, is largely forgotten today in part because her work was overshadowed by her father, Edward Austin *Sheldon*, and her husband, Earl *Barnes*. Her emphasis on using artifacts and archival material in teaching history to students in different grade levels from primary school through college courses was rare. She further developed her father’s educational ideas. Edward Austin *Sheldon* introduced his interpretation of the Pestalozzian “object teaching system” or the concept of teaching “objects,” using concrete known concepts and moving into more abstract terms within the *Oswego* public schools, and at the *Oswego* Normal School in 1859 (*Barnes*, 1911; *Rogers*, 1961).

The purpose of this research is to provide significant insight into Mary *Sheldon Barnes*’s teaching style and develop a more accurate understanding of her as an educator within the historical context of the time period in which she worked. *Barnes* was an educator and textbook writer during the late 19th century, a time when American society was largely patriarchal. Her teaching methods were uncommon because she preferred not to use textbooks, unless the books would challenge students’ critical thinking skills. She advocated the primary, or as she called it, original “source” methods in teaching history. The books developed by *Barnes* were for “the whole field of our study in the direction of connecting the subject vitally to the student” (*Barnes*, 1896, p. 1). Reviewing *Barnes*’ writing and teaching methods, several questions arise. Did prevailing social theories in the mid-to-late nineteenth century impact *Barnes*’ perspective in providing teaching methods to a generation of teachers? How did *Barnes*’ textbooks shape other later *progressive* textbook writers? How have modern day textbooks and methods been influenced by *Barnes*?

Writings about Mary Sheldon Barnes

Biographical information about *Barnes* is very limited, other than in a few secondary sources. *Barnes* provided a brief autobiographical sketch of her life up until 1887 (*Mary Sheldon Barnes*, 1888, p. 160). Two separate chapters written by Francis Monteverdi incorporate a small amount of information about her life and her teaching methods (Crocco & Davis, 1999, 2002). Another overview was provided by Robert E. Keohane who discussed her life and teaching methods in articles in *The American Heritage Magazine* in 1948 (Keohane, 1948a, 1948b). There has not been an extensive amount of biographical information published about her life, and no one has written a book length biography.

Several articles written about *Barnes's* teaching methodology provide a richer understanding of the impact she had on 20th and 21st century classroom teachers. Two writers conducted a hermeneutic inquiry of a limited amount of her work to gain a fuller understanding of her as a teacher and educator of teachers. Two articles which she authored regarding savages and children were reviewed by Welsh and Brooks (2008), who concluded she was influenced by G. Stanley Hall and his interpretation of recapitulation theory, as it was known during the latter half of the 19th century. This theory was eventually discredited and associated with racist theory during the early 20th century. However, there is some question as to the precise meaning of Hall's theory within current academic interpretation (Fallace, 2009; Garrison, 2008).

The few authors who have researched *Barnes's* teaching methodology have found her teaching approach distinct. For example, Robert

Keohane (1949) discussed the use of her original source material as a means of challenging long-held practices employed by secondary teachers in the early part of 19th century. In an article by Stuart A. McAninch (1990, p. 51), he criticized her teaching method as "reinforcing uncritical acceptance of the common and comfortable assumption among white Americans [that] national progress was remedying racial discrimination." *Barnes's* source method was reviewed by David Saxe (1989) as an alternative method of teaching, which was in use at the end of the 19th century. Another article by Saxe (1994, p. 485) discussed the use of *Barnes's* methods book as one in which there was "an approach that she developed in earlier school texts, one that required teachers to know and understand a set of aims or goals prior to selecting a proper historical, investigative, and pedagogical method." Beyond these few articles about *Mary Sheldon Barnes* and her pedagogical style and influence, little else is published about her life and work. By examining *Barnes's* textbooks and other primary source documents, we add to the knowledge of her pedagogy, and seek to foster an understanding of her relevance in today's classrooms.

Historical Background and Early Years

At the time of *Barnes's* birth in 1850, the United States of America experienced a considerable amount of political turmoil. First, the United States witnessed a huge influx of immigration because of economic and political upheaval in Europe. Irish immigrants, for example, came to New York to escape starvation in Ireland. Second, the industrialization of the Northeast led to the rapid growth of cities as people moved to urban centers to obtain jobs and education. Third, the dispute over slavery furthered a domestic crisis between the North and South. The Compromise of 1850 created cottage industries in cities like *Oswego*, New

York because these cities became major destinations as part of the Underground Railway (Sheldon, 1911). Fourth, political parties fractured and the Democratic Party divided regionally. The Whig Party eventually disappeared. The Free Soil and Republican Parties filled political voids for anti-slavery interests. Finally, new social issues came to the forefront of national attention. Women's rights became a topic of discussion as evidenced in the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. The Roman Catholic Church established many religious schools dedicated to educating Catholic children in their faith. Leading female educators, such as Catherine Beecher, encouraged women to become teachers because of women's perceived natural abilities (Altenbaugh, 2003).

Amidst the political turmoil, Mary Downing Sheldon was born on September 15, 1850 in Oswego, New York (Commire & Klezmer, 2002). She was born at the United States Hotel building where her parents resided at the time (Sheldon, 1911). The building became the site of the Oswego Normal School (now known as State University of New York at Oswego). Her mother was Francis A.B. Stiles, a teacher at Perry Center Academy, a private school, in upstate New York. Mary Downing Sheldon had four siblings, Charles Stiles, Francis Elizabeth (Alling), Anne Bradford (Howe), and Laura Austin (Inman) (Dr. Sheldon's Death, 1897).

Barnes's schooling took place in the Oswego public schools where her father was the first superintendent. Edward Austin Sheldon had organized and developed the Oswego school system in 1853 and placed all his children in the schools. Oswego was a relatively small community at the time. The city was known as a stopping point for runaway slaves along the Underground Railroad more than as a location for developing new educational philosophies. During Mary Sheldon's early educational years,

Dr. Sheldon discovered what he later called the "object teaching system" during a trip to Canada (Sheldon, 1911). Lecture and recitation were common teaching methods used in the United States during the 19th century. Students studied traditional subjects such as grammar, mathematics, and Latin. Students who deviated from rote memorization methods faced varying degrees of punishment from teachers. "Teaching methods remained the universal drill, repetition, and memorization with ample doses of corporal punishment" (Altenbaugh, 2003, p. 137). Dr. Sheldon introduced his "object teaching system" method to the Oswego public schools shortly after his return from Canada. Dr. Sheldon's method required the use of primary sources and objects for all levels of schools that existed in Oswego. Mary Sheldon's primary and secondary educational years provided her learning experiences with both forms of educational methods. The use of primary sources in Dr. Sheldon's teaching methodology had a major impact on Mary Sheldon's later teaching methods and textbook development.

Early Education and Training

Upon completion of her secondary education in the Oswego public schools, Mary Downing Sheldon enrolled into the Oswego Primary Teachers Training School, later known as Oswego Normal School. Her father was the founder and administrative leader of Oswego Normal School. Oswego Normal School was different from many normal schools because of the strong emphasis on actual teacher training prior to graduation and the practical fieldwork in the teaching profession. Mary Downing Sheldon was well prepared to be a teacher when she graduated. She became a certified teacher, which was a significant achievement given only to superior graduates of normal schools (Crocco & Davis, 1999). Mary Downing Sheldon taught for two years prior to entering one of the first

classes to admit women at the University of Michigan in 1872. In her class of 72 incoming students, 12 were women (Bohan, 2004). Alice Freeman Palmer and Lucy Maynard Salmon were classmates, but they were not in the same graduating class. Palmer became a well-known educator and, later, President of Wellesley College (Bordin, 1993). Salmon became a professor at Vassar for many years (Bohan, 2004). With the exception of two women from the incoming class of 1872 (who died prior to graduation), all ten women graduated. This 100% graduation rate is a remarkable statistic, especially when considering the dropout rate for men from the same group was fifty percent (Bordin, 1993).

Early Teaching Career

Mary Downing *Sheldon* was able to take advantage of the new freedom for women that developed in the post-Civil War period. Her family supported her college career and subsequent professional teaching responsibilities. After she completed her degree work, she received an Artium Baccalaureus (A.B.) at Michigan, *Sheldon* returned to New York to work at *Oswego* Normal School teaching Latin, Greek, Botany, and History to her students. She would have preferred to teach more science courses, however, she accepted the teaching position, and, as she later stated, "revenge herself by applying scientific methods to history" (*Barnes*, 1888, p. 160). The classes used the seminary structure that was relatively new pedagogy within academic circles. *Sheldon* learned this approach during her studies at the University of Michigan. She, like others, moved away from the generally accepted teaching method of lecture and recitation (Bohan, 2004). Combining the seminar method along with primary source method which she learned from her father allowed her to become a pioneer in primary source methodology (Griggs, 1898).

In an article she originally created for the Massachusetts Teachers Association, *Sheldon* discussed the issue of teaching history in a format similar to that used in teaching natural sciences. She noted the process for history teaching had similar procedures used by natural scientists. She described history as having "living units" and "organisms" in the same manner as biologists examined their objects. Political states had an organization similar to molecular structure as both experienced growing and dying in stages, but used different labels. *Sheldon's* initial training in the sciences provided her with a unique perspective to make this argument and comparison (*Sheldon, M., n.d.*).

Upon graduation from the University of Michigan, Mary Downing *Sheldon* entered professional teaching when the United States was in a period of social, political, and economic disturbance. More women than men were eligible to marry due to the casualties from the Civil War. The combined North and South death total was at least of 618,000 soldiers (Casualties in the Civil War, 2010) and required women to take a more active role in the workplace and family life. Women's role in political life, began with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, and became more prominent after the Civil War. Women sought to change their position in American society and their political voice (Edwards, 2006). Mary Downing *Sheldon* found that she enjoyed teaching history. Wellesley College offered her the position of chemistry chairperson which she declined because history had become her passion. Wellesley College eventually offered her a position as history professor in 1878, which she accepted. She taught at Wellesley for two and a half years, and implemented in her

classroom what she termed the “source method” (Crocco & Davis, 1999). *Sheldon* described this method during an address to the Massachusetts Teachers Association, “I give to my pupils, without comment, photographs of its art, extracts from its literature and laws, abstracts of its organization; without comment, but with plenty of questions, whose answers they must find for themselves in the given material” (Sheldon, M., n.d., p.103). *Sheldon*’s teaching experience at Wellesley College provided her with an opportunity to expand her teaching methodology in a female environment. The Wellesley faculty developed a concept which they defined as “symmetrical womanhood.” This concept was defined as a “healthy woman who moved through adolescence and into middle age without physical or psychological ailments; marriage would not necessarily be her supreme goal” (Palmieri, 1995, p. 148).

Middle Years

After two and a half years at Wellesley College in 1879, Mary Downing *Sheldon* returned to *Oswego*, New York. Doctors diagnosed her with a heart ailment that would affect her health for the remainder of her life. She returned to *Oswego* for rest and recuperation which lasted for the better part of a year. In 1880, she "starts for Europe in company with her friend, Dr. Mary V. Lee" (*Barnes*, 1888, p. 161) to gain additional rest and to conduct research. *Sheldon* returned to the United States in 1882. She began teaching again at *Oswego* Normal School. She used her own methods and knowledge of historical subjects to write her first book entitled *Studies in General History: Student’s Edition* which was published in 1886. In the preface to the book, she described the goal of making a history book challenging for students, as learning “how to judge and interpret” history (*Barnes*, 1886, p. viii).

On August 6, 1884, *Sheldon* married Earl *Barnes* and became Mary Downing *Sheldon Barnes* [Author’s note: Mary *Sheldon* will be known as Mary *Sheldon Barnes* for the remainder of the manuscript]. He was 11 years younger and regarded as an exceptional student when he attended *Oswego* Normal School (Crocco & Davis, 1999). Although there was a discrepancy between eligible males and females after the Civil War, their age difference was significant and unusual for the time. Earl *Barnes* would become a well known professor, educator, and lecturer in his own right.

Earl *Barnes* held several teaching assignments during his academic career. Mary *Sheldon Barnes* dutifully moved with her husband around the world. His first job was in Hoboken, New Jersey where he taught for two years after graduating from *Oswego* Normal School. *Barnes* then enrolled at Cornell University to work on his Bachelor’s degree in American history; however, he did not complete his studies at Cornell. Both *Barnes*’s traveled to Zurich, Switzerland, at the request of Cornell University President, Andrew White, to study “Pedagogies” at the University of Zurich in 1887-88. Upon return to the United States, the couple moved to Indiana University, in Bloomington, Indiana where Earl *Barnes* served as a professor of European history and completed his A.B. degree in 1889 at Indiana University. Later, Earl *Barnes* returned to Cornell University, to earn his Master’s degree in 1891.

Productive Years

After completing his advanced education, Earl *Barnes* accepted a position at Leland Stanford Junior University (now Stanford University) as Chairman of the Education Department, Professor of Education, and Secretary of the Faculty in 1891. Stanford University was a

young university, having been opened for students in 1885 by Leland Stanford, who made his fortune in railroads. Mary Sheldon *Barnes* became an Assistant Professor of History at Stanford and had the distinction of becoming the first female assistant professor at Stanford in 1891 (Griggs, 1935).

The couple would stay at Stanford University for seven years. During these years, Mary Sheldon *Barnes* developed two of the most popular courses at the university according to one of her fellow professors, Edward H. Griggs. These were the “History of the Pacific Slope” and “Nineteenth Century” in which she used her methods first described in *Studies in General History*. Griggs described her teaching methods as “departures in historical work” (Griggs, 1898) and very different for the late 19th century.

During her time at Stanford, *Barnes* wrote an essay for the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* in 1895 entitled “History: A Definition and a Forecast.” In this work, she encouraged historians to look at the totality of culture and events in order to have a more thorough “story of progressive action” [italics in original text] (*Barnes*, 1895, p. 129). Her essay incorporates language, art, literature, and a holistic approach to the subject of history. From her perspective, history “studies the progressive personality of a people, as it develops through environment and action into social success or failure” [italics in original text] (1895, p. 130). She expected historians to think in larger points of view rather than in narrowly defined avenues such as government, art, and other social sciences.

In 1895, *Barnes* published a book about American history in the same style as her previous book about world history. In the book, *Studies in American History*, her husband, Earl *Barnes* was a co-author. Frances Monteverde

believed that she was the main author because of the similarity to style and format in her first book. *Barnes* wrote the entire book and gave credit to her husband (Crocco & Davis, 1999). Despite *Barnes*’s ability to write a textbook, as evidenced by the publication of her first book in 1885, she accepted Earl *Barnes*’ name on the book as co-author. One of three explanations for this circumstance could account for the authorship issue; first, perhaps there was pressure on Earl *Barnes* to produce books or articles to maintain his professorship status. Co-authorship is a plausible explanation given the requirement of “publish or perish” at some universities. There, however, is no direct evidence to support a publishing requirement at Stanford University at this time. A second explanation would be Mary Sheldon *Barnes*’s deferment to her husband in the late 19th century, within a male dominated society. Perhaps out of deference for her husband, *Barnes* thought her work might be better received by male dominated school boards and by teachers with her husband as co-author rather than if she had sole authorship. She was aware of the “symmetrical womanhood” concept debated at Wellesley College. The symmetrical womanhood concept provided women with a more well-rounded depiction beyond the physical beauty portrayed by many writers in the 19th century. During this period, women generally were portrayed as homemakers and physically beautiful without any intellectual aspirations. The symmetrical woman image incorporated intellect, emotions, and beauty to provide women with a robust alternative to outward appearances (Palmieri, 1995).

A third alternative for giving co-authorship to Earl *Barnes* could be the age level of the target market for this new book focusing on American history, a younger generation of students. Earl *Barnes* had done considerable work regarding

children and their intellectual capacities (Griggs, 1935). Mary Sheldon *Barnes* would have obviously consulted Earl *Barnes* and requested his input on the material she was addressing in the book. Whatever the reason, we may never have a complete understanding of the co-authorship situation in her second book.

The following year, in 1896, *Barnes* published her third book *Studies in Historical Method*. This book was a summation of her process for teaching methodology using source materials (*Barnes*, 1896). In her third book, she was the sole author. The question about authorship again comes to the foreground as we are left to wonder why she did not give co-authorship to Earl *Barnes*. During their final year at Stanford University, *Barnes* learned her husband was having an affair with a student. The affair may have explained why Earl *Barnes* was not given co-authorship on the third book.

The relationship between Earl *Barnes*, a professor, and his student was considered inappropriate by Stanford University's administration. The president of the university, David Starr Jordan, who had been *Barnes*'s mentor at Indiana University and recruited him for Stanford, requested his resignation ("Guide to Earl *Barnes* Papers, 1882-1912"). Both Earl and Mary *Barnes* resigned in 1897. The affair must have created difficulties for Mary Sheldon *Barnes* and probably impacted her health. The heart ailment which required her to leave Wellesley College years earlier may have created more challenges. Following their resignations, the *Barnes*'s traveled to Europe for study and additional research for *Barnes*'s fourth book. Apparently, *Barnes*'s heart ailment became more severe in the early months of 1898. According to Earl *Barnes*, a few weeks before her death, further heart problems developed. She chose to undergo a risky operation for the time, which had only a ten

percent chance of success. She died on August 27, 1898 in London shortly after the operation. *Barnes*'s ashes are interred in a cemetery in Italy. Her plot lies between those of two great poets, Shelley and Keats (Crocco & Davis, 1999).

Significance

Mary Sheldon *Barnes* was an important educator at the end of the 19th century. She introduced working textbooks for teachers and students during a tumultuous era in our education and political history. *Barnes* was able to provide a methodological style that allowed students to learn history through a hands-on pedagogical approach. Many educators are unaware of her teaching methodology in the 20th century, although the process of using "source material" is still in vogue as a method and appears in today's social studies textbooks. In many classrooms, teachers use visual materials such as videos or PowerPoint slides to show students objects or engage them in using primary source materials and historical artifacts. Edward Austin *Sheldon* defined these as objects and *Barnes* called them *sources*. Her educational method and perspective still are employed in many classes throughout the United States and other countries throughout the world. For an example, the websites "Our Documents" or "National Archives and Records Administration" provides teachers and students easy access to primary source documents in American history with the simple click on the computer. *Barnes* believed that her method of teaching using primary source material as artifacts along with her seminar method encouraged students to relate to history. She was a pioneer in introducing pictures and primary source material to history books for the next generation of students. Although the methods she and others used were overlooked by the Committee of Ten report in 1893, this does

not mean that her impact was not powerful on history teachers throughout the United States. According to D.C. Heath and Co. (Barnes's publisher), *Barnes's* book, *Studies in General History*, sold almost 39,900 copies in the United States between 1885 and 1929. Her book, *Studies in American History*, sold 35,996 between 1891 and 1919 (Keohane, 1948b). These are significant sales numbers during a time in which the secondary schools student population was growing. Later textbook writers used her pioneering concept of including primary *sources* into history books as a matter of routine.

The use of the seminar method is prevalent in most educational settings today. *Barnes* was not the creator of the seminar method, but she found it to be stimulating and relevant for students. *Barnes* was a leader in the teaching of history and should have a place as a pioneering educator. Additional research should be conducted in order to facilitate a better understanding of her social and educational perspectives and philosophy. As we look back, we know that during *Barnes's* brief life in the late 19th century, it was a time in which social practices and educational theory were changing rapidly. *Barnes's* untimely death in 1898 does not allow modern researchers an opportunity to observe her evolving perspectives or pedagogy within the social structures at the turn-of-the-century. The legacy of her advocacy of *object teaching*, her use of primary source documents and seminar methods, and her three textbooks, all make an important contribution to the legacy of history teaching.



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- For examples of primary source documents go to: www.ourdocuments.gov and www.archives.gov

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Chisholm, J. & Bohan, C., (2011, October) *Pestalozzian Influences on Mary Sheldon Barnes's* *Recreating Sheldon Barnes's* life story in a biographical format is challenging. Woodward states "there is history in every biography, or should be, and it is subject to the same hazards of error." In other words, written material may have a different interpretation than the original recorder intended.