

I challenge you to read this research while contemplating two things to yourself: “We spend our entire adulthood reconciling our childhood.” “Given our current state of affairs (be that political, social, matters of human rights, etc.), do you believe these activists could look at current society and back to their time and goals and see their sacrifice as ‘worth it?’”

For purposes of *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, Josephine Baker represents something for which all people — especially Guy — can aspire. Her career path and trajectory abroad represent freedom/an escape — something sorely missing from the black experience within the United States. As characters within the play, they consistently struggle within society’s confines, not allowing for any growth for blacks. Even for someone like Josephine Baker, her travel and exposure to the French Theater scene set her on the map. They provided the credit due to her, not American society. Baker’s “Banana Dance” in *La Folie du Jour* at the Folies-Bergere Theater took France by storm. Baker was not simply an artist; however, she aided French military officials by passing secret notes containing information heard while performing behind enemy lines. She transported the confidential information by writing with invisible ink on music sheets. Yet, despite being known as a war hero and world-renown artist abroad, upon returning home, Baker faced the harsh realities of Jim Crow and segregation like any other black person. One drop was all it took to strip any identity worth living for blacks in America. Lamenting this ideology, Baker once asserted, “You know, friends, that I do not lie to you when I tell you I have walked into the palaces of kings and queens and into the houses of presidents. And much more. But I could not walk into a hotel in America and get a cup of coffee, and that made me mad.” Baker is an excellent example of the physical representation of integration and success possible in a society not structured around the confines of racism. Baker started adopting children of all races, ethnicities, and cultures, calling them her “Rainbow Tribe” as living proof that an integrated society could cohabitate and thrive. She died at 68 from a cerebral hemorrhage. But the French government still honored her in death by awarding her the Croix de Guerre, the Rosette de la Résistance, and named her a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor for her service in the French Army during World War II. She was also the first American woman buried in France with military honors.



Margaret Sanger was the only white person of significance within *Blues for An Alabama Sky*. However, *Blues* rightfully included her as she was a pioneer for women's reproductive freedom from the beginning of the movement, founder of Planned Parenthood, and the original face of "the pill." Within her story, we see an intersection with the character of Delia. Sanger's childhood set her on her eventual path riddled with many trials and tribulations. Sanger was the sixth child out of eleven children both to Michael Hennessy Higgins (stonemason) and Anna Purcells Higgins. Both actively practiced Roman Catholicism. Due to her father's profession, hardships as Irish immigrants, large family size, and more, Sanger's childhood was riddled with poverty. Her circumstances were only made worse by her mother's death (Anna) at age 50 due to the physical toll of bearing eleven children. These circumstances pushed Sanger towards care, and she later became a nurse. Her 1910 move to New York City alongside her husband exposed Sanger to various progressive movements she participated in (including women's labor movements, strikes, etc.). She believed family planning was crucial to ending the cycle of women's poverty because "Everywhere we look, we see poverty and large families going hand in hand. We see hordes of children whose parents cannot feed, clothe, or educate even one half of the number born to them. We see sick, harassed, broken mothers whose health and nerves cannot bear the strain of further child-bearing. We see fathers growing despondent and desperate, because their labor cannot bring the necessary wage to keep their growing families. We see that those parents who are least fit to reproduce the race are having the largest number of children; while people of wealth, leisure, and education are having small families." Yet, it was illegal for the average person to talk about or distribute birth control information at the time. Sanger's mission was to provide women with birth control information and repeal the Federal Comstock Law, prohibiting the distribution of obscene materials through the mail (i.e., birth control information). Her active stance and distribution of illegal information led to charges against her, her fleeing to England, her subsequent divorce, etc. She returned and stood trial in 1915, but the charges were dropped after the death of her five-year-old daughter. She continued her fight by opening birth control clinics despite getting arrested again. Still, she eventually succeeded in getting the courts to rule that physicians could prescribe contraceptives to women for medical reasons – the first step. She would continue her work, getting the legislature to legalize birth control for any reason and ending the Comstock laws, after which she retired, opening the door for other women. Her story ends where we see the intersection of our character Delia, a black woman fighting for reproductive rights somewhat towards the end of Sanger's journey. However, her fight started in different places, with her battle starting within black churches and the clergymen herself. Delia's story and mannerisms greatly parallel Sanger's life, from her mission to her minor rebellions.



Langston Hughes was another prominent artist leading out of the Harlem Renaissance and throughout parts of the civil rights movement. For those reasons, he is another person aspired to and beloved by the characters within *Blues for An Alabama Sky*. They see him as the epitome of success and freedom for black men in America, someone to learn from and surround oneself with even though one might not personally know him. Yet, despite being beloved today and within the play's pages, scholars have called Hughes the "most abused poet" in American history. Why? Well, hatred towards him stems from the material he wrote. Hughes had a remarkable life that saw him move from 6 different cities before he was 12. He worked careers as a truck farmer, cook, waiter, college graduate, sailor, a doorman at a nightclub in Paris, etc. He had visited Mexico, West Africa, the Azores, the Canary Islands, Holland, France, and Italy. His travel, a lack of sense of home, and many different experiences all created a desire to create honest art that showed true stories. Whereas others shied away from depicting blacks in any conceivably negative light to whites, Langston Hughes did not. His goal was to portray the entire black experience – the joys and hardships of working-class black lives while avoiding "sentinel idealization" and "negative stereotypes." He once said, "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too." He believed white approval or disapproval should not disparage the truth from being shown – a truth that allowed blacks to see and relate to art depicting their earnest lives. Why create art to change white people's perception of black people? Hughes had a firm conviction and hope in humanity for a world where people could sanely and understandingly live together. These beliefs led to his decline in popularity, especially during society's more racially turbulent latter years. However, he never lost his convictions, and he was still the first black American to earn his living solely from his writing and public lectures. Hughes died on May 22, 1967, from complications of prostate cancer.





*Blues For An  
Alabama Sky*

Significant People



# Josephine Baker

## Early Life

- Born Freda Josephine McDonald in St. Louis, Missouri to a poor working-class mother Carrie McDonald and a vaudeville drummer Eddie Carson
- Carson abandoned them shortly afterward, and Carrie married an unemployed man named Arthur Martin
- The pair had two more daughters and a son
- Josephine grew up cleaning houses and babysitting for wealthy white families who reminded her “be sure not to kiss the baby.”
- At 13 years old, she got a job waitressing at the Old Chauffeur’s Club.



# Josephine Baker

## Career Beginnings

- Began performing as a girl (dance, comedy, song) on “The Chitlin’Circuit”
- She toured in the US with the Jones Family band and the Dixie Steppers in 1919, performing comical skits
- Took France by storm with her “Banana Dance” in La Folie du Jour at the Follies- Bergere Theater
- During WWII, she aided French military officials by passing on secrets she heard while performing in front of the enemy. She transported the confidential information by writing with invisible ink on music sheets.
- Returned to the US during the 50s and 60s with renewed desire to fight racism. It was during this period that she began adopting her “Rainbow Tribe.”
  - a. *"You know, friends, that I do not lie to you when I tell you I have walked into the palaces of kings and queens and into the houses of presidents. And much more. But I could not walk into a hotel in America and get a cup of coffee, and that made me mad."*



# Josephine Baker: Awards/Honors, Romantic Life & Death

- Had a brief marriage to Willie Wells.
- She was married and divorced three more times: to American Willie Baker in 1921 (whose last name she chose to keep), Frenchman Jean Lion in 1937 (from whom she attained French citizenship), and French orchestra leader Jo Bouillon in 1947 (who helped to raise her 12 adopted children).
- She later had a pseudo, non-legally binding marriage to friend Robert Brady
- Awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Rosette de la Résistance for her service in the French Army during World War II
- Josephine Baker died from a cerebral hemorrhage at 5 am on April 12, 1975
- The French government honored her with a 21-gun salute, making Josephine Baker the first American woman buried in France with military honors
- Also named a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor by the French government



# Reverend Adam Clayton Powell: Early Life

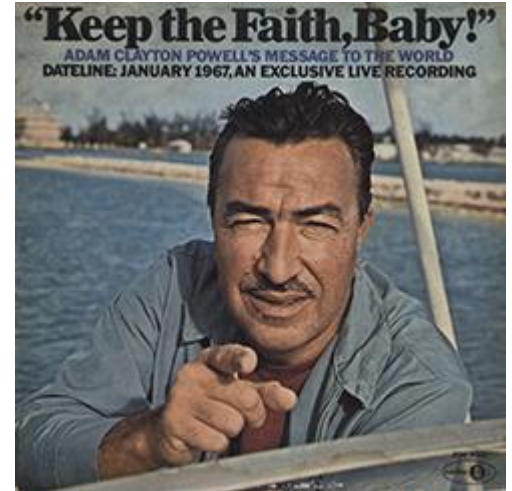
- Powell was born in November 29, 1908 in New Haven Connecticut
- He grew up in New York City where his father was the pastor of Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church
- Graduated from Colgate University in 1930
- Returned to Harlem to become an assistant pastor at Abyssinian while earning a master's degree in religious education from Columbia university in 1932
- After his father's retirement in 1937, Powell became the new pastor of Abyssinian, ministering to a congregation of over 10,000 members
- He used the pulpit to speak on issues of social change related to discrimination in employment and government services
- Was a prominent and controversial figure in the struggle for civil rights.





# Reverend Adam Clayton Powell: Political Actor

- He headed the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign, which succeeded in opening up jobs to African Americans at New York stores, utility companies, and city buses.
- In 1941, Powell became the first African American elected to the NY City Council
- In 1944, he was elected to the US House of Representatives, representing the congressional district of Harlem
- Alongside the NAACP, he put forward a legislative rider barring federal funds from segregated institutions. It did not pass for years, but he continued to put it forward so often that it became known as the Powell Amendment
  - The amendment’s contents were incorporated into the Civil Rights Act of 1964



# Reverend Adam Clayton Powell & MLK Jr.

- Powell and MLK jr. were initially supportive of each other's work, but King lost trust in Powell in 1960 after the congressman threatened to lie to the press about King's friendship with his advisor Bayard Rustin.
- Powell's career was undermined by scandal, including allegations of tax evasion and misuse of government funds.
- The house even voted not to seat him in 1967.
- King and Powell continued to publicly cooperate for several years; however they further fueled after Powell publicly renounced nonviolence in 1968.
- Powell won reelection, and in 1969 the Supreme Court ruled that his expulsion from Congress was unconstitutional.
- Powell was reinstated, but without seniority. In 1970 he lost a close reelection bid to Charles Rangel.
- Powell died two years later on 4 April 1972.



# Isabel Washington: Early Life and Career

- Also known as Isabel Washington Powell
- She was a singer, actress, teacher, and a social service family worker of the New York City Public School system
- She was born in Savannah, Georgia on May 23, 1908 to Robert T. (postal worker) and Harriet Walker Ward Washington (dancer)
- She was one of five children
- Her sister Fredi actually also became an actress
- Their mother died when the girls were little, and so both were sent to school at St. Elizabeth's Convent in Cornwell Heights, Pennsylvania
- After completing her education and moving to New York City after her older sister, she first performed as a showgirl during the Harlem Renaissance
- Powell performed as a singer and actress during the 1920s and 1930s, appearing at the Club Alabam' and other New York City prominent nightclubs like the Cotton Club
- She also performed in singing shorts for Warner Brothers and R-K-O and touring New England and Midwestern theaters of Lowe's Circuit



# Isabel Washington: Marriage & End of Life

- She gave up her stage career after meeting Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr.
- Powell adopted her son, Preston Jr., from a previous marriage
- Powell Jr.s family objected to the marriage.
- They were married from 1933-1945
- She helped Powell in his election the NY CC and as a senior pastor
- During the 1960s to the 80s, she worked as a social service family worker and teacher for NYC PS system.
- She passed away on May 1, 2007
- She was known for brining diverse people together and for promoting the political legacy of her late husband
- Fun Facts: her favorite color was red, her favorite food was seafood, and her favorite time of year was the fall.



# Langston Hughes: Early Life

- Born James Mercer Langston Hughes in February 1, 1902 in Joplin Missouri
- His parents divorced when he was a young child, and his father moved to Mexico
- He was raised by his grandmother until age thirteen, when he moved to Lincoln, Illinois to live with his mother and her husband
  - Here, Hughes began writing poetry
- They eventually settled in Cleveland, Ohio
- Before age 12, he had lived in 6 different American cities.
- After graduating from high school, he spent a year in Mexico and then went to school for a year at Columbia University in New York City



# Langston Hughes: Collegiate Education & Career

- In November 1924, he moved to Washington, D.C. where his first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, was published by Alfred A. Knopf
- When his first book was published, he had had careers as a truck farmer, cook, waiter, college graduate, sailor, doorman at a nightclub in Paris, etc.
  - He had visited Mexico, West Africa, the Azores, the Canary Islands, Holland, France, and Italy.
- He finished his college education at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania three years later.
- In 1930, his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, won the Harmon gold medal for literature.
- Langston Hughes was a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.
- Hughes was a major poet who also wrote novels, short stories, essays, 11 plays and countless works of prose.





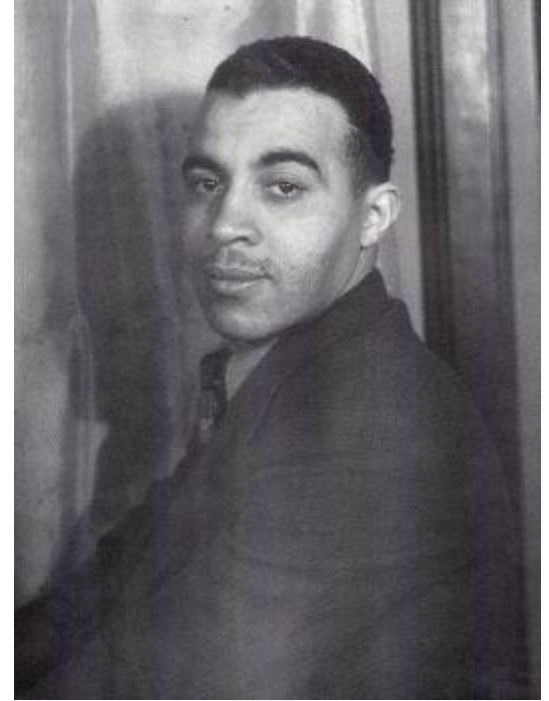
# Langston Hughes: Notoriety

- His goal was to portray the joys and hardships of working-class black lives while avoiding sentinel idealization and negative stereotypes
  - “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.”
- His approach was often critiqued in the early days by many black intellectuals because they thought his portrayals simply provided an unattractive view of black life.
- He has been called “the most abused poet in America... ”
- His belief in humanity and his hope for a world in which people could sanely and with understanding live together, led to his decline in popularity during the racially turbulent latter years of his life. He never lost his convictions, however,
- He was the first black American to earn his living solely from his writing and public lectures.
- Hughes died on May 22, 1967 from complications with prostate cancer.
- His residence at 20 East 127th St in Harlem was given landmark status by the New York City Preservation Commission, and East 127th St. was renamed “Langston Hughes Place.”



# Bruce Nugent

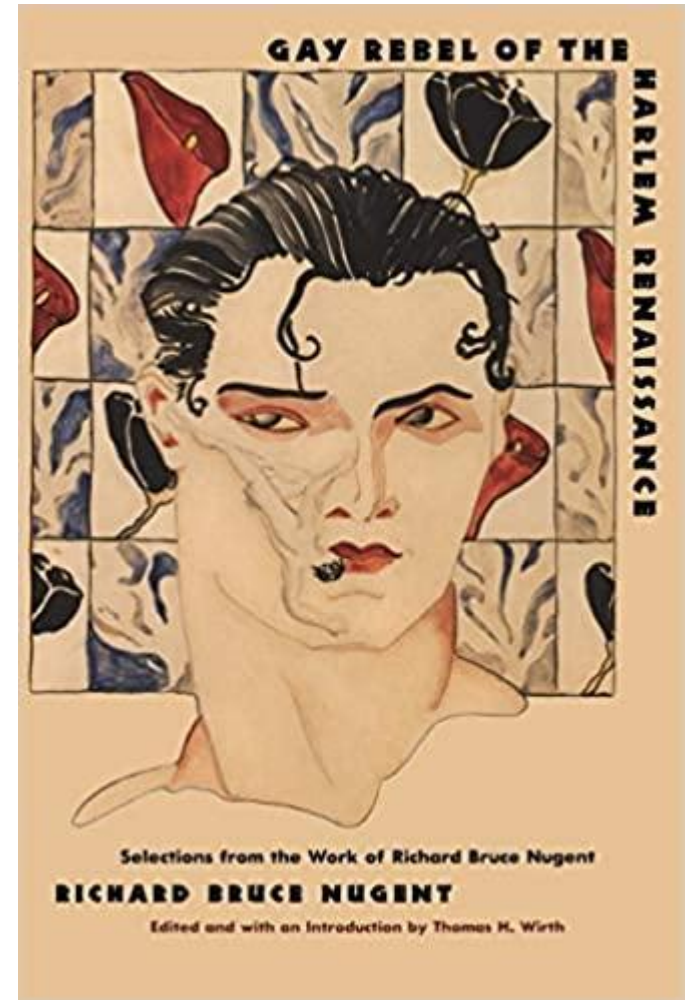
- He was born Richard Bruce Nugent to middle class Washington, D.C. socialites Richard Henry Nugent and Pauline Minerva Bruce Nugent
- He attended Washington D.C.'s Dunbar High School where one of his teachers was the writer Angelina Weld Grimke.
- After his father's death, Nugent's mother moved him and her other son to New York City
- Nugent worked various odd jobs to help support his family through age thirteen.
- In New York City he says he "discovered Harlem," which was become the "Black Mecca" of African Americans during the "Jazz Age."
- When Nugent told his mother he wanted to become a writer, she sent him back to D.C. to live with his paternal grandmother.
- Nugent would frequent Saturday salons hosted by poet Georgia Douglas Johnson for writers, artists, and intellectuals including Dr. Alain Locke





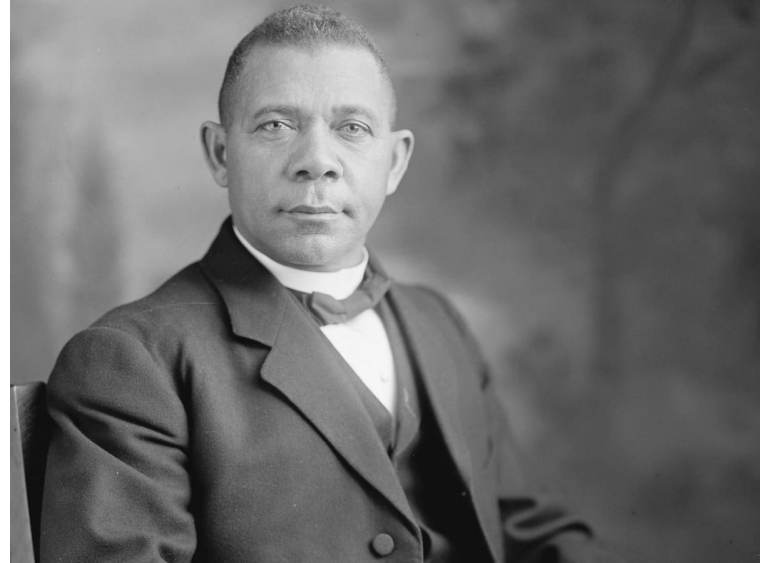
# Bruce Nugent

- Douglas introduced Nugent to Langston Hughes whom he followed back to Harlem
- In Harlem, Hughes introduced Nugent to Hughes's circle of friends and influential literary thinkers and writers
- Nugent remained a minor piece of the cultural movement
- In 1926, he became a co-editor of Fire!!! Where he published "Smoke Lilies and Jade" — a signature short story in which homosexuality is the central theme.
- Like Nugent, the story's protagonist proudly embraced his sexual orientation and lifestyle exclaiming, "You see, I am a homosexual. I have never been in the what they call 'the coset.' It never occurred to me that it was anything to be ashamed of, and it never occurred to me that it was anybody's business but mine."
- Scholars speculate that this identity might have cost him a more prominent publishing career.
- Was an artist, writer, actor, dancer, dilettante, painter and bohemian of 1920s Harlem.



# Booker T. Washington

- Was born into slavery on April 5, 1856 in a hut in Franklin County, Virginia. He became a leading African American intellectual of the 19th century
- His mother was a cook for the plantation's owner, and his father was a white man unknown to Washington
- Jane moved her family to Malden West Virginia after the end of slavery where she married Washington Ferguson, a free Black man.
- Washington went to school after working from 4-9 am each morning in a local salt works
- His second job was a local coal mine. Through that job, Washington first heard about the Hampton institute, a school for formerly enslaved people in southeastern Virginia
- In 1872, Washington walked the 500 miles to Hampton, where he was an excellent student and received high grades
- He later studied at Wayland Seminary in Washington D.C.



# Booker T. Washington: Career

- He was invited back to teach in 1879
- Chapman, the schools founder eventually referred Washington for a role as principal of a new school for African Americans in Tuskegee, Alabama
- Founder of the Tuskegee Normal Industrial Institute (Now Tuskegee University) in 1881. Where he assumed the role of principal at age 25 until his death in 1915
- Washington actually hired George Washington Carver to teach agriculture at Tuskegee in 1896
- He founded of the National Negro Business League in the early 1900s
- Washington advised President Roosevelt and Taft. He was the first African American to be invited to the White House in 1901 by Roosevelt.
- His infamous conflict with Black leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois over segregation cause strife. He felt it was better to remain separate from whites than to attempt desegregation as long as whites granted them access to economic progress, education, and justice under the U.S. courts.



# Booker T. Washington: What We Know Today

- We do now know that Washington secretly financed court cases that challenged segregation and wrote letters in code to defend against Lynch mobs.
- He is remembered as the most influential African American speaker of the time.
- On November 14, 1915, Washington died of congestive heart failure at age 59.
- He left behind an institute over 1500 students, a faculty of 200, and an endowment of nearly \$2 million.



# Marcus Garvey: Early Life and Career

- Marcus Mosiah Garvey Jr. was born on August 17, 1887, in Saint Ann's Bay, Jamaica to a stonemason and a domestic servant
- As a young man, he travelled and worked in several Latin American Countries
- He later settled in London, England where he studied at then Birkbeck Called (University of London)
- He worked as a messenger and handyman for the African Times and Orient Review
- In July 1914 in Jamaica, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association with the goal of achieving Black nationalism through the celebration of African history and culture. UNIA represented the largest mass movement in African-American history.
- He pushed to support the "back to Africa movement" and created Black Star Line to act as the black owned passenger line that would carry patrons back and forth to Africa
- He fostered restaurants and shopping centers to encourage black economic independence.
- He supported Pan-Africanism, was a black nationalist, and believed in racial separatism
- He challenged W.E.B Du Bois





# Marcus Garvey: Late Life & Death

- In 1922, he was charged with mail fraud in connection with the Black Star Line's Orion
- A series of events led to his reputation as a swindler. He also met with white supremacists like the KKK
- He was convicted of mail fraud and sent to Atlanta Federal Penitentiary
- President Coolidge commuted his remaining time after protests by black Americans, and he was deported to Jamaica in 1927.
- He continued his work with the UNIA and political activism before moving back to London in 1935.
- He died on June 10, 1940 after suffering multiple strokes.



# Margaret Sanger: Early Life

- Sanger was born September 14, 1879 in Corning, New York to Michael Hennessy Higgins (stonemason) and Anna Purcell Higgins (devout Roman Catholic Irishwoman).
- She was the sixth of eleven children
- Her early life was shaped by poverty during childhood and the death of her mother at age 50. This death was believed to be caused by the physical toll of eleven pregnancies
- Sanger became a nurse after attending Claverack College and Hudson River Institute in 1896 and completing the nursing program at White Plains Hospital in 190s
- In 1902, she married William Sanger, an architect, and they moved to Hastings, NY
- The couple had three children.



# Margaret Sanger: Political Awakening

- They moved to New York City in 1910, where they became involved with Progressive Era activist and intellectuals
- Sanger became a member of the Women's Committee of the New York chapter of the Socialist Party
- She participated in women's labor protests, such as strikes in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912 and Paterson, New Jersey in 1913
- She believed that the ability to control family size was crucial to ending the cycle of women's poverty. At this time, it was illegal to distribute birth control information
- Sanger's mission was to 1. Provide women with birth control information and 2. Repeal the federal Comstock Law, prohibiting the distribution of obscene materials through the mails (ie. Birth control info.).
- In 1914, Sanger landed the feminist publication *The Woman Rebel*, which advocated for birth control.
- She was charged with violating the Comstock laws and fled to England. She and her husband divorced in 1914.
- She returned a year later to stand trial, but the charges were dropped after public pressure caused by the unexpected death of Sanger's five-year old daughter.





# Margaret Sanger: Late Life and Death

- In 1916, she opened the first birth control clinic in Brownsville, Brooklyn. She was arrested a week later and spent 30 days in jail.
- She appealed the conviction and lost.
- The court did rule that physicians could prescribe contraceptives to women for medical reasons, so she opened another clinic in 1923 (Planned Parenthood Federation of America).
- She married oil tycoon James Noah Sloss in 1922
- She launched the Birth Control Review in 1917 and founded the American Birth Control League in 1921
- In 1929, she formed the National Committee on Federal Legislation for birth control to lobby Congress for federal legislation that would permit doctors to prescribe birth control
- In 1936, the courts made it legal for doctors to prescribe birth control. In 1971 the Comstock laws finally ended, nearly a century after their passage
- Sanger retired in 1942 and moved to Tucson, Arizona
- In the late 1950s, with funding from International Harvester heiress Katharine McCormick, Sanger recruited Gregory Pincus to develop an oral contraceptive. The "pill" was approved by the FDA in 1960.
- She died in 1966 at the age of 86.



Mrs. Margaret Sanger, the great birth control advocate, and her two sons

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The Struggle for Freedom	Should be Declared?
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