The Interaction and Reinforcement of Quakerism, a Strong Belief in Votes for Women, and an Activist Career: Mariana Wright Chapman as Case Study and Starting Point.

I am applying for a grant to support research on women’s suffragist activism in New York, especially that of the Quaker suffragist leader Mariana Wright Chapman (1843-1907), which I hope will form the backbone of my senior history thesis. During the summer of 2012 I had the opportunity to help organize and catalog a number of other collections housed in the Friends Historical Library (FHL) at Swarthmore College, and learned that the Chapman Papers had recently been added to its archives. The material associated with Mariana Wright Chapman was contributed to the FHL collection in 2006 and 2007 and has not yet been extensively studied. Little scholarship has been done on this extraordinary person. I would like to begin research during the summer of 2013 and continue to study Chapman’s life and her social/political circle of suffragist correspondents during senior year, as I am writing my thesis. Though it will be a thesis in the History Department, I am particularly interested in discussing the religious motivation to Chapman’s activism and that of her compatriots and correspondents. It is very clear that she was a devout Quaker and interacted with many other Quakers in involved in suffragist activism. From its inception, women’s rights in New York had always had Quaker connections, not surprising given the social activism and egalitarianism of the Society of Friends.1 However, I want to explore the more specific effects Chapman’s Quaker ideologies on her actions as a suffragist activist.

Proposal Overview:

As I am currently studying abroad in Oxford, I will not return to the United States until near the end of June. I would expect to spend approximately a week at home doing preliminary readings. I live near a major university and have access to their library system, so most of the main texts about Chapman’s more famous correspondents and the movement as a whole would be readily available. I would then plan to arrive at Swarthmore at the beginning of July, and to work there until the beginning of the Fall 2013 semester. After my one week of preliminary research, I would spend nine weeks in the Friends Historical Library and Swarthmore Peace Collection archives, with occasional consultation of additional Philadelphia area archives for background, movement-wide material. During my time in England this spring I will consult the extensive Quaker collection at Friends House, London, in order to do some background research on how Quakers in the UK ideologically (even theologically) argued support for suffrage. There were close but complex ties between Quaker suffragist leaders in the UK and those in the USA, and the growing militancy of American suffragists around the turn of the century was in some ways a response to the radical British suffragists,2 rendering the works of UK Quakers quite relevant to this study.

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I expect to spend a busy senior year completing my honors requirements and writing my thesis. The research regarding Mariana Wright Chapman’s involvement with the suffrage movement would be the basis of my history thesis on her work for women’s suffrage, her beliefs and priorities and the state-level organization and the national-level organizations and how she handled and saw their interactions. This summer research will allow me to write a much more in-depth, comprehensive, and useful piece of culminating work. Refined and polished, it will, I hope also be a piece of work that could be used in applications to graduate programs in history or religion, and perhaps even suitable for submission to journals.

**Background information and Questions: Mariana W. Chapman:**

Mariana W. Chapman was the president of the Women’s Suffrage Association of Brooklyn, and only resigned in order to become president of the New York State Suffrage Association. She was a leader of the suffrage movement in New York State, and her papers include letters from major figures such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Lucy Stone. Born in New York City, she moved with her family to Ohio, where she met and married Noah H. Chapman under the care of the Springboro Meeting. The marriage was in 1864, and in 1880 her new nuclear family moved to Brooklyn. It was in Brooklyn, in the mid-1880s, that she first became an activist for women’s suffrage. From that point it appears that her primary energy was funneled into activism towards women’s suffrage, though throughout her life she was involved with other causes, including equal rights in spheres beyond the vote, prison reform, education (including political education), and pacifism.

Chapman’s letters discuss both the grand strategies and the daily work of the suffragists, and allude to internal conflicts of opinion and underlying philosophy. The FHL collection also includes her personal journals, ranging from 1895-1900, and speeches and articles Chapman wrote on the topic of suffrage and women’s rights. All of these documents have the potential to contribute to our understandings of the suffragist movement and its dynamics. Since many of the papers pertain especially to local work in New York, and there has been a recent trend in suffragist scholarship to understand regional variations, a careful reading of her papers has the potential to add to understanding the particular dynamics in Brooklyn and New York overall. Chapman’s position as a mid-level, primarily local leader gives her a different perspective than the major national figures whose biographies we know well. Her interactions with them have the potential to show us a great deal about the organizational network of suffragists, and to offer a more nuanced view of the movement as a whole. Her later journals offer the chance to see how these ideals and beliefs interacted and sometimes reinforced each other, and those written before her period as a suffragist activist may well shed light on her religious beliefs and political opinions on suffrage and activism as they formed. I want to find out what brought her towards political activism instead of, say, preaching, and what led her to such an high level of involvement once she chose suffragist activism.

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3 Inventory of the Family Papers of Mariana Wright Chapman, 1808-1983, Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.
I want to understand how the religious and political beliefs were interconnected, and what motivated her political work. I want to move away from the generalizations about the women’s movement as narrated in secondary sources and tertiary popular history. I want to find out the specifics of the interaction between Chapman, her activism, and her beliefs, Chapman and her compatriots and their beliefs. This can be gleaned from her journals and her letters. The letters in her collection discuss theory and they are also about the quotidian interactions between the state or local suffrage organizations and the national ones. They are full of tactical choices and of ways to smooth feathers and recommendations for the best choices to make. They are also letters between friends and warm acquaintances, which makes the organizational structure perhaps more efficient—but perhaps also more fraught. There are political science studies on which circumstances gave rise to which tactics among suffragists, but I would like to know how activists themselves made the decision, what factors they weighed explicitly. In the end, why did any suffrage organization work as it did? What pull did suffragist leaders exert on each other, and how did they exercise that power?

**Qualifications**

As a History and Religion major in the Honors program, I am well-suited to do this research. I already have a fairly comprehensive understanding of Chapman’s context from my background research. I am comfortable working with historical documents from my history major and my work in the FHL collections during the summer of 2012. I am familiar with the staff and resources of the FHL and the Peace Collection. My current work in the UK is primarily tutorials regarding Christian Life and Thought, as well as various issues in nineteenth-century theology, addressing, along with other topics, the religious context in which the movement for women’s suffrage emerged. In my coursework at Swarthmore I have taken a number of history courses focused in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that included study of social movements. These include History 51, Black Reconstruction; History 8b and 8c, Southern and Central Africa, respectively; and History 138, Black Urban Communities. History 51, especially, incorporated an emphasis on the study of social action by African American women and their religious and political reasons for taking action. I have also done some work in Gender and Sexuality studies, namely Religion 53, Gender, Sexuality, and the Body in Islam and Sociology/Anthropology 49b, Comparative Perspectives on the Body. Having worked in the FHL, I have an understanding of its structure and the resources available in its archives. From reading a great deal of Quaker material last summer while familiarizing myself with the FHL, I have a background understanding of the world that Chapman and her husband circulated in and familiarity with the basic beliefs about equality that were critical to her. I would look forward to this opportunity to study Mariana Wright Chapman through the collection that has recently become available at FHL and to do research this summer that will contribute to my senior thesis project during my senior year.

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4 For example, see McCammon, Holly J. “‘Out of the Parlors and into the Streets’: The Changing Tactical Repertoire of the U.S. Women’s Suffrage Movements.” *Social Forces* 81.3 (March 2003), 787-818.
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