

LAURA DE FORCE GORDON AS A SPIRITUALIST

Life Lessons From The Great Beyond

By

Laura J.C. Davis

History of Women in the Legal Profession
Professor Barbara Allen Babcock
Stanford Law School
April 3, 2000

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Laura de Force Gordon: Timeline of Spiritualism and Suffrage**
- II. Introducing Laura de Force Gordon...Spiritualist**
- III. Spiritualism and the Woman's Movement**
- IV. The Spiritualist Life of Laura de Force Gordon**
 - A. The Formative Years, 1838 – 1866**
 - B. Traveling West, 1867 – 1871**
 - C. Settling in California: Journalism, Law and Suffrage, 1870 – 1893**
 - D. The Great Beyond, 1893 – 1907**
- V. Appendix A: Bibliography**
- VI. Appendix B: Suggestions for Further Research**

INTRODUCING LAURA DE FORCE GORDON . . . SPIRITUALIST

Laura de Force Gordon was a pioneer for woman's rights and a leading speaker for woman's suffrage and the equality of the sexes. She ran for state senate, was the first woman to edit and publish a daily paper in the West, and together with Clara Shortridge Foltz, succeeded in securing an amendment to the California State Constitution that permitted women and minorities to attend public universities. She studied and practiced law on her own, was a criminal defense attorney, and was the second woman admitted to the United States Supreme Court Bar. Laura was instrumental in California's silk culture and president of the California State Woman Suffrage Society. And she was a spiritualist.¹

Most biographical sketches take this tone when mentioning Laura de Force Gordon. Her accomplishments as a suffragist, journalist and attorney are listed and recounted with zeal. In contrast, there is usually little discussion about Laura as a spiritualist. While Laura's incredible achievements deserve a place in the annals of history, they do not provide a full picture of Laura. No person is solely defined by a laundry list of their actions. A study of Laura as a spiritualist does not wholly define her either, but when her spiritualism is viewed as a complement to her actions, it provides some insight into Laura as a multi-dimensional woman . Through Spiritualism, we can study Laura not only for what she did, but also for who she was.

Spiritualism was a large part of Laura's life from a very early age – before she stepped into the roles for which she is most commonly remembered. This paper is an attempt to capture a sense of how being a spiritualist opened up a world of possibilities to Laura that were unknown to most women of her day and how Spiritualism helped inform her political and personal views and played a part in the decisions she made throughout her life. Laura believed that the dead

never really leave us, but still exist in this world to teach the living valuable lessons. Laura's story is still with us today, and I hope to learn from exploring it through the lens of Spiritualism.

SPIRITUALISM AND THE WOMAN'S MOVEMENT

Any discussion of Laura as a spiritualist must begin with an overview of Spiritualism itself. In its simplest form, the Spiritualism of the mid to late 19th century was about communication with the dead. Spiritualism started to take shape in Rochester, New York in 1848, when two young sisters heard a series of knocks or raps which were interpreted as spirit contact. Spiritualists believed that the spirits of the deceased existed all around the world of the living and communicated with the living through the help of an earthly medium. Spirits first began communicating through a series of raps, then started to spell their messages, and finally began speaking to spiritually sensitive mediums.²

The notion of spirit communication appealed to many people in the mid 1800s. At this time antibiotics had not yet been invented and half the deaths in New York state were of children under five.³ Through spirit communication, death, which was an all too common visitor, was not the end but the beginning of a new relationship among the living and the departed. It comes as no surprise that interest in Spiritualism grew during the Civil War when spirit communication provided comfort to families and friends of the many men lost in battle.

Three factors provoked popular interest in Spiritualism throughout this period of death and disease. First, Spiritualism encompassed a more liberal theology than that of strict Calvinism or Evangelicalism. Those turning to Spiritualism also had a desire for evidence of immortal life. Finally, and perhaps most important during this time, Spiritualism fulfilled a desire to overcome bereavement. The most common scenario of conversion involved families

turning to Spiritualism after the death of a relative. Spiritualism granted to the living the peace of knowing that their loved ones had gone on to a better place, a place the spiritualists called Summerland, or The Great Beyond.

Spirit communication did not focus only on personal conversations, but had a more socially elevated purpose. Spiritualists quickly came to believe that spirits could give valuable lessons to those on earth, particularly about how to achieve a higher spiritual condition. This aspect of Spiritualism was very much a movement in the latter part of the 19th century and was very much tied to reform. Unfortunately for study purposes, while there were national and regional spiritualist conventions, spiritualist periodicals, and some organizational literature, Spiritualism had no all encompassing official organization like that of other religions. Spiritualists shunned official organization and focused instead on extreme individualism, making it difficult to form generalities about this movement.

Spiritualists discussed the topic of organization and even formed an organization committee at the National Convention of Spiritualists in Chicago in 1864. Over the protestations of many, the committee adopted a permanent organization. Many expressed disappointment over this decision, and others felt that a different type of organization was needed. Even after this formation, however, the spiritualists remained a highly individualistic group of people and a formal organization never really succeeded.⁴

A successful permanent organization would facilitate the study of Spiritualism, but even with fragmented groups and beliefs, it is possible to point out a few pervasive themes that permeated 19th century American Spiritualism. Along with individualism, spiritualists also promoted total equality. The spiritualists believed that individual autonomy should and would automatically lead to social, political, educational and professional equality. Unequal relations

hampered one's achievement of a higher spiritual condition and spiritual purity, and therefore Spiritualists believed all humans must be treated equally.

Total equality required denouncing any form of human authority. Spiritualists believed in a nonmale deity and de-emphasized ordained clergy.⁵ Unlike strict Judeo-Christian theologies, spiritualists allowed and encouraged spirit communication without the need for outside authority. This message fit well into the reform ideologies of the abolitionists and woman's rights activists, and many abolitionists and movement women were either involved in Spiritualism from the beginning or later became spiritualists.

Spiritualism focused especially on the equality of women. In the 19th century, society moved away from viewing women as "Eves" who were inherently flawed and fallen from grace, to considering women as naturally pure and religious creatures. A woman was expected to remain pure, pious, passive and domestic in order to remain true to her sex and feminine identity. Mothers were considered the guardians of religion in the family, a role which served to tie and bind them to the home and the domestic sphere. Since most deaths occurred in the home, this also made them the guardians of death. Many mothers turned to Spiritualism out of a refusal to accept the Calvinist belief that their unsaved infants and children were destined for hell upon their deaths. Spiritualism gave women a sense of power over death. Spiritualism also appealed to women and reformers because it touted a nontraditional interpretation of marriage, one in which husband and wife were soul partners of equal status who were ruled by the laws of nature and not the husband's law. According to this theology, women were allowed and encouraged to abstain from sexual relations if they so chose, a choice which gave them the freedom to prevent unwanted multiple pregnancies that were harmful to the health of baby and mother and further

tied women to the home. This “free love” notion was often confused by the press and the public at large as advocating sexual immorality, adultery and promiscuous behavior.⁶

Spiritualism opened up a new realm of professionalism to women without blatantly upsetting the larger hegemonic notions of passive femininity. Women were thought particularly suited to communicate with the dead and a large number of women were attracted to Spiritualism as mediums. Women, especially adolescent girls, were thought to be more proficient as mediums because of their spiritual refinement and docile nature.⁷ Unlike dominant Christian religions, the spiritualist God was neither male nor female and did not judge on the basis of gender. This was an advantage for women, because the spiritualist God presented no obstacles to female leadership. Women did not have to be ordained or accepted by a male clergy in order to participate as spiritualist leaders. Any person who could perform and attract a following could be a medium. The female medium was accepted largely because it conformed to 19th century social and political ideals regarding women and femininity.

Test mediums embodied this view of women. These mediums were considered frail and impressionable vessels that spirits would easily be able to contact and control. Women in this profession were simply messengers who would often be taken over by different spirits. Women took a professional role as test mediums, but this was largely a passive role. By contrast, women who became trance speakers were able to use these notions of passivity and frailty to actually assert some control.

While both test mediums and trance speakers opened the professional sphere to women, trance speaking particularly offered a unique opportunity for women spiritualists to enter the public realm. Trance speakers appeared in public and gave lectures that were inspired by the spirits. Some lecturers spoke in a trance state as if possessed by the spirits, while others were

inspired by spirits to write their lectures but remained in a lucid state while speaking. Spiritualist reformers, especially women, were able to draw an audience for their reform topics by indicating that their orations came from beyond. Not surprisingly, many of the spirits contacted were concerned with reform issues and woman's rights. Women lecturers could speak publicly about these issues without risking rebuke because they were considered passive vehicles for spirit messages and had no responsibility for the messages themselves.⁸ Many women spiritualist speakers internalized this notion of passivity by suggesting that they were not responsible for their actions, but were controlled by spirits. Lizzie Doten, a famous spiritualist trance speaker, said that her "brain was fashioned, and [her] nervous system finely strung, so that [she] should inevitably catch the thrill of the innumerable voices resounding through the universe, and translate their message into human language as coherently and clearly as [her] imperfections would allow."⁹

Eventually, noted women on the spiritualist lecture circuit gained more of their own voice and less of a spirit voice, but were still permitted to speak because Spiritualism had legitimized their actions and secured them an audience. The strongest and most radical woman's rights statements came from spiritualist speakers. This was not only important to each individual woman speaker, but to the woman's movement as a whole. In the mid 1800s, female trance speakers were among the first women allowed to speak to both men and women in the same audience.¹⁰ In 1876, out of nearly three hundred people listed in a spiritualist periodical as spiritualist lecturers, one hundred and twenty seven were women.¹¹ Trance speakers helped spread the word about reform issues even beyond the podium, because many newspapers that did not run reform speeches would run trance speeches.

Spiritualists were concerned with total equality for women. During the Civil War the abolitionists and spiritualists split because some abolitionists and movement women felt that woman's rights should be subordinated to the abolitionist cause. Abolition became the central issue during the Civil War and many woman's rights activists chose to abandon the woman's cause until after the war was over. After the war, the women's rights activists who remained in the abolitionist camp narrowed their cause to suffrage. Even though spiritualists agreed with the reform messages of abolitionists, they considered themselves a separate group, so did not need to narrow their cause to suffrage. They made total woman's rights their preeminent reform issue. The spiritualist activists remained dedicated to entire equality of all human beings and devoted to woman's rights as a whole, including suffrage, dress reform, marriage reform and health reform.

Not all feminists were spiritualists, but all spiritualists advocated woman's rights. Spiritualism was undoubtedly intertwined with the major woman's movements of the 19th century. Some of the most influential suffragists had spiritualist encounters. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was known to hear spirit raps in her home. Susan B. Anthony, on the other hand, only wished for spirit communication. On the road for suffrage, she wrote to Stanton that she wished she could be a trance medium so the spirits would put the right words in her mouth.¹²

Many suffragists distanced themselves from Spiritualism after the press began to associate the movement with various social evils, including free love, insanity and poor health. One newspaper talked about Spiritualism "spreading over the land, unsettling society, undermining morals, destroying faith in God, disturbing social circles, [and] sundering family ties." It noted that "[a] kindred evil to Spiritualism is the Woman's Rights doctrine, [which] is doubtless the natural result of Spiritualism."¹³ The San Francisco Bulletin tried to link Spiritualism with clinical insanity for 15 years.¹⁴ Suffragists, already looked upon as disgraceful

by many, were reluctant to be associated with Spiritualism. Susan B. Anthony noted that suffragists were afraid to thank Spiritualism for its influence in the movement, for they feared that the public might consider them spiritualists and they would be “doubly damned.”¹⁵

After the public began to view Spiritualism with a wary eye, many women who were both spiritualists and suffragists were asked to leave the woman’s suffrage movement lest they damage the movement’s reputation.¹⁶ Others chose to publicly distance themselves from Spiritualism, but continued to speak on woman’s issues, especially suffrage. Suffragists toned down Spiritualism’s radical views, at least publicly, and focused mainly on the vote. Trance speakers who became heavily involved with suffrage were less concerned with spirit communication and more concerned with the vote. These women benefited from their spiritualist backgrounds. They had gained self confidence, prominence and a public platform as trance speakers. As such, they were more readily accepted as lecturers than other movement women, even when not guided by the spirits, and were able to use the public avenue Spiritualism had opened to them to speak about women’s issues.

THE SPIRITUALIST LIFE OF LAURA DE FORCE GORDON

Laura de Force Gordon led a spirit filled life, and not just when she was summoning the dead. If she contacted us today and shared the secrets of her passion and success, surely she would attribute much to her Spiritualism. Laura became a professional, public woman in the mid 19th century at a very early age because Spiritualism afforded her this opportunity. Spiritualism also introduced Laura to a variety of reform issues, especially woman’s rights, that she would advocate during her entire life.

Laura was not a successful speaker, journalist, attorney or activist simply *because* she was a spiritualist. Laura used her skill, talent and tenacity to make the most of the opportunity presented by Spiritualism. At first, this meant traveling the spiritualist lecture circuit, making not only a name for herself as an orator, but also making money that would greatly help her in her struggle for woman's rights. Later, Laura realized that in order to advance woman's rights, her talents were better used as a suffrage speaker than a trance speaker. She may have also wanted to distance herself from Spiritualism during a time when the religion was being bombarded with bad press. Although Laura may have publicly distanced herself from Spiritualism as a movement and a religion during the latter part of her life, it still remained an influence. She never stopped utilizing the skills she gained as a trance speaker, the opportunity to draw crowds to her speeches, and the reform ideals she learned as a young woman. Laura was a spiritualist for life . . . and perhaps beyond.

The Formative Years, 1838 – 1866

Laura was born ten years before the first spirit rappings in Rochester, New York. Her mother, Catherine Doolittle Allen de Force, gave birth to Laura in Erie County, Pennsylvania, on August 17, 1838. Laura was one of nine children born to Katy and Abram de Force.¹⁷ At some time during Laura's early years, her family moved to LaCross Wisconsin, on the upper Mississippi River, where they managed a boarding house.

Just a few years after the Rochester rappings, in the 1850s, adolescent girls and young women began to appear as trance speakers in the Eastern United States.¹⁸ Laura was one of these young women and began trance speaking at an early age.¹⁹ There is no clear explanation how Laura was introduced to Spiritualism or what motivated her family to leave the

Congregational Church to which they had previously belonged. In 1855, when Laura was 16 or 17 years old, one of her brothers died. This may have prompted Laura's mother to become a spiritualist out of a thirst for knowledge of the safety of the deceased and a desire to put an end to her period of bereavement. Perhaps at this time Laura realized that she could communicate with her brother's spirit. Generally, the pure and passive young women in a family were considered more prone to receiving spirit messages.

Although this death in the family scenario fits the most common pattern of conversion, it is not entirely clear that this is what happened. Some sources talk of Laura giving spiritualist lectures at 15 years old, before her brother died. If so, Laura must have discovered that she was able to communicate with the spirits at a very young age. Laura may have turned her family to Spiritualism and not the other way around. Another possibility involves her father. Abram was disabled by severe rheumatism and Laura's mother supported the family through needlework. It would be nearly impossible for a woman to support a such large family solely through needlework, especially in the 19th century. No doubt Laura's talents on the lecture circuit greatly increased the family's income. Some sources estimate that by the time she was 19 years old, Laura earned up to \$100 an appearance.²⁰ This was an extraordinary amount of money, especially for a woman. At this time the average salary was around \$400 per year.²¹ The spiritualist reform messages must have also appealed to a family that was supported by a woman in a society in which women were not considered or treated equally to men.

Regardless of the reason Laura entered the spiritualist lecture circuit, once she arrived she made her mark as a gifted speaker. It was reported that she was able to go into trances and speak for those in the spirit world.²² Laura never indicated that she could not speak with the spirits and she was well regarded by her contemporaries. This paper will take her spirit communication at

face value. Laura began touring the East as a spiritualist lecturer when she was 17 years old and showed amazing strength of character at this young age.²³ She kept a diary of these travels, from which we learn that she was often criticized by clergy and referred to as an “infidel.”²⁴ She also had high ambitions, and wrote resolutions regarding what she would try to accomplish during her time on earth.

Through her spiritualist activities Laura encountered people and situations that would later become part of her life as a woman’s rights activist and attorney. She met Susan B. Anthony during her travels and did not have a very high opinion of her at first, although later they were friends and crusaders in the suffrage cause. She wrote in her diary that Anthony was not a likeable woman, who appeared cold, unfeeling and intolerant to views that diverged from her own. Spiritualists, on the other hand, invited spirits because they were naturally warm individuals and believed that all views should be subject to thought and discussion. Laura also visited a prison in New York in the 1850s and felt a need to help, “free the prisoners from bondage that was a living tomb.”²⁵ This sentiment echoes the individual autonomy ideals of reform spiritualists and perhaps was a small reason Laura chose to later practice law and focus on criminal defense work.

Laura’s activities as a spiritualist and her correspondence with other spiritualists also gives us insight into her personality and early religious and political views. In 1855, when Laura was just 16 or 17 years old, she represented a group of intellectual reformers, the “Friends of Reform,” who contemplated the great mysteries of life.²⁶ Laura planted seeds of reform at an early age, which later came to full bloom as she worked and lectured for woman’s suffrage in the latter part of the century.

Laura corresponded with a number of spiritualists during her early years. The contents of letters from her spiritualist contemporaries bring to light the reform issues concerning spiritualists at that time. Laura received a number of letters from Frank Tallmadge from 1858 to 1861. Tallmadge referred to Laura's "mission as public teacher."²⁷ He may have been referring to the reform issues she spoke about or simply her lectures about Spiritualism. Whatever the issue, this "mission" must have required strength and determination on Laura's part. Tallmadge questioned whether the "bitter scorn and opposition" she encountered "pain[ed] [her] heart." In another letter, he addressed equality of the sexes while still accepting the dominant view of women as more refined and civilized creatures, writing that "[w]omans place will be everywhere by the side of mans . . . in the Pulpit, the Juditial [sic] and Legislative halls, there inspiring and refining the more turbulent and masculine elements."²⁸

Laura, commonly referred to by family and friends as Lola, was highly regarded by her acquaintances and appears to have had a strong spiritual magnetism. Friends praised her spiritual mediumship and accomplishments as well as her modesty. Tallmadge said he was drawn to her by a "strong magnetic tie" and called her the "possessor of a beautiful gift from on high surrounded and inspired by the Angel host, by them guarded and guided and loved."²⁹ Tallmadge invited Laura to discuss her travels, lectures and her progress as a medium with him. Tallmadge, who was not a medium, wrote that mediumship was a great gift, as mediums were the "connecting link between the spiritual and the Natural plane of life and existence."³⁰ Like so many others during the latter part of the 19th century, he longed to receive guidance and words of progress from the spirits.

Laura's correspondents not only applauded her ability to speak with spirits but also her public speaking prowess. Like other spiritualists, Laura spoke on a variety of different topics as

the spirits inspired her.³¹ On one occasion another spiritualist friend and admirer, H. Link, wrote to Laura and asked her to stop on her way to another engagement and “deliver a lecture on the Monroe Doctrine.”³²

Laura’s also received letters in which the writers addressed her quite freely about their thoughts and feelings, from which we can make inferences about Laura’s personality. Lizzie Doten, a famous female spiritualist speaker who often shared billing with Laura and was the Vice President of the first national spiritualist convention in 1864, wrote to Laura that her heart was drawn to her “as one of the wide awake, natural souls in this world.” She praised Laura for her “good ways and works” and promised that if she died, she would come back as a spirit and help Laura.³³ Tallmadge referred to her alternately as a dear friend and dear Lola. Link moved from addressing her as Miss de Force to Lola, finally calling her a “great scamp.”

Link and Tallmadge appear to have been enamored of Laura, and their letters present Laura as very good natured and playful. This paints a picture of Laura as a young woman that is quite different from the 19th century notion of the masculine woman’s rights activist. Tallmadge wrote Laura about his affection, assuring her that since he became a spiritualist his “affectional nature has been quickened and much developept [sic], and [his] appreciation of the female character is nobler.”³⁴ Link answered a question Laura posed to him in a previous letter by telling her that she had done no wrong, “but acted true to [Nature] and Nature’s God, in the free exercise of individual sovereignty.” He went on to discuss what probably referred to love and intimacy as the “secret spring in the human breast” and the “[s]oul’s birth right.” He talked of Laura’s “playful joyous nature” and offered her guidance in her career and personal life, telling her to consider him “Elder Brother.”³⁵

Link also wrote concerning Laura's relationship with her then fiancé, and later husband, Dr. Charles H. Gordon. Even after Charles and Laura were married Link continued to write to her that she stirred his blood and made his heart leap with her letters, telling her that it was a "[g]ood thing [she had] a fellow to 'report' to."³⁶ In spite of this affection, Laura married Charles in 1862, one year after the Civil War began. Charles, from Scotland, was a doctor and captain in the Army's Third Rhode Island Volunteer Calvary. Some biographies credit Charles with bringing "travel and excitement" into Laura's uneventful life. However, Laura was traveling and speaking throughout the East long before she met Charles and there is little indication that she stopped when she got married. Although at some point Laura served as Charles' nurse in New Orleans, she continued to speak for part of the war. In 1863, Charles wrote Laura a series of letters from Rhode Island, asking her to visit him from the various cities where she was engaged to speak.³⁷ There is no indication that Charles was involved in Spiritualism at this time, although he later attended seances with Laura.³⁸

By the time the Civil War ended in 1865, Laura had become quite a celebrated trance speaker and a spiritualist group in San Francisco, the Friends of Progress, invited Laura to deliver a lecture in the city by the bay. Ultimately Laura's speech, which she delivered in 1868, was not sponsored by this short lived group that broke up in 1866 or 1867.³⁹ Regardless, after receiving this invitation, Laura and Charles decided to move West.

Traveling West, 1867 – 1871

Laura and Charles began to travel to Nevada in a converted civil war ambulance wagon in 1867. Laura spoke as a spiritualist on various topics in towns along the way. There is no indication that Charles practiced medicine during their travels or otherwise contributed

professionally. During this time, Laura began to lecture frequently on the issue of woman suffrage. She delivered a speech entitled “The Elective Franchise” in Denver in March of 1867. She would deliver this speech in many places, and ultimately in San Francisco in 1868 as the first public woman suffrage speech in California . A Denver reporter commenting on this speech praised Laura as “an accomplished and talented woman holding forth on the principal questions of the day.”⁴⁰

Laura and Charles arrived in the silver mining camp of Virginia City, Nevada on November 28, 1867, where Laura gave a series of spiritualist lectures for over two weeks.⁴¹ She and Charles also attended local Spiritualist Circles where people attempted to communicate with the dead. Alfred Doten, brother of famous spiritualist Lizzie Doten, was an informal physician’s apprentice and newspaper man in Virginia City at this time. He kept a detailed diary from which it is evident that he was quite taken with the “noted speaking medium.” Doten described Laura as a “[f]ine looking woman” and attended many of her lectures, calling her the “[b]est lady lecturer [he] ever saw or heard,” noting that she “seemed . . . to be inspired.”

During this period, Laura delivered lectures to full houses, with audiences of up to 600 people who paid an average of 50 cents per lecture and frequently applauded her speeches. Sometimes she gave more than one lecture in a day. She delivered her spiritualist lectures in a lucid state, not in a trance. In her orations, Laura advanced Spiritualism’s notion of individual autonomy by not touting Spiritualism as the only true religion, but by speaking about how all spiritualist ideas were “simply subjects given for honest thought and investigation.” Laura’s lectures had significant impact on this small mining town. After her visit, the town formed a spiritualist association and later a small suffrage society. At the close of one of her lectures, a

group of women commended Laura for her activities on behalf of women by presenting her with a silver bullion brick.

Not everyone who attended Laura's lectures was motivated by her discussions of Spiritualism. On December 6, 1867 a local reverend interrupted and challenged Laura during her address. Laura did not shy away from his questions or submit to his protestations, but instead met with the reverend after the lecture and arranged to have a discussion with him the next evening at his church. She asked him to pick the topic of his choice and he chose the Bible. This exchange never took place, however, because the trustees of the church would not let Laura speak there. She moved the speech to a different venue but the reverend never showed up because his congregation objected to the discussion. A packed audience submitted a resolution stating that the reverend, by not being there, acknowledged that he was unable to prove the infallibility of the Bible. Laura, ever upholding equal rights for all, rejected to this resolution on the basis that it served an injustice to the reverend because he was not present to defend himself. Upon Laura's disapproval, the resolution was finally dropped. After this, Laura, unopposed by local clergy, continued to draw crowds for her lectures on the "Inspiration and Infallibility of the Bible."

Charles practiced medicine in Virginia City from 1867 to 1869. Laura no more played the part of the domestic wife in the West than she had in the East, and the Gordons continued to travel for Laura's lectures. Laura left Virginia City in December 1867 and began the trip to San Francisco to fulfill her invitation to speak. On February 18, 1868 Laura gave the first public woman suffrage speech in California at Platt Hall in San Francisco, entitled "The Elective Franchise." Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton called this lecture "[t]he first attempt to awaken the public mind to the question of suffrage for women."⁴²

Many women who went on to become active in suffrage in California, and who were influential in forming the California State Woman's Suffrage Society in 1870, attended Laura's speech. The San Francisco Call recounted the manner in which Laura gave her speech, noting that it was quite long and was made up of lengthy sentences and large words. Laura argued that education should be the only qualification to the vote, and that suffrage should be given to all people regardless of color, sex or nationality. She even spoke about how foreigners should be allowed to have a say in the government of their new country. These were the views of a spiritualist suffragist. Laura never stopped espousing the spiritualist ideals of total equality while arguing for the cause of woman's suffrage. Contrary to some accounts, Laura did not abandon Spiritualism at this point to speak solely on woman's suffrage and equal rights. She gave this speech as a spiritualist and was still considered a spiritualist speaker. Moreover, she continued to travel and deliver lectures on other spiritualist topics, though her speeches were increasingly about suffrage and equality.

In the spring of 1868, after lecturing in San Francisco, Laura returned to Nevada to speak in Virginia City and Austin. This time, Laura lectured for nearly two months in Virginia City on a variety of topics, including "Self Righteousness," "Thomas Paine," "Religious Legislation," "The Rationale of Prayer," and "Infallibility of the Scriptures." Laura again participated in Spiritualist Circles. There is evidence that Charles also participated this time by working the spiritual dial, a device by which spirits could spell out messages, a similar idea to a modern day Ouija board. Alfred Doten wrote about how at one circle Laura and another girl went into trances and said they saw spirits.⁴³ Laura was not usually in a trance when seen publicly, but this is evidence that she still had some ties to her spiritualist roots.

Laura continued to argue for suffrage in 1869, at the same time that Susan B. Anthony was forming the National Woman's Suffrage Society. Laura traveled from Virginia City to Austin, Nevada, where her first lecture was on the suffrage question. Years of speaking as a spiritualist must have given her confidence in public, as she was quite brave to speak in these small mining camps where saloons were the mainstays of the abundantly male communities. While in Austin, she stayed with the only American family at the Ophir Canyon Mining Camp. In a letter to a newspaper, she commented that there was no church, hall or schoolhouse for her to lecture in.⁴⁴ This did not stop the resourceful Laura, however, and she secured the use of a saloon for her lectures. After years of traveling by herself as a spiritualist lecturer and frequently meeting with opposition, Laura was an experienced and inventive woman. In most places bars were all male establishments where women would only enter under the most dire circumstances. Laura, however, not only entered these saloons, but talked the owners into renting them to her for her lectures – lectures advocating woman suffrage. Of course, Laura probably did not advertise that woman suffrage was her focus. From her days as a spiritualist, Laura knew how to draw a crowd, and laced her speeches with topics likely to draw men since they were the eligible voters.

Laura used the fact that she was admired and sought for her speaking abilities to her advantage. She had the undeniable ability to use any given platform to put forth the principles of total equality without straying too far from the subject at hand. Laura was in Austin for the Fourth of July, and when the speaker hired for the celebration fell ill, Laura was asked to deliver the oration with only one day's notice. Laura obliged and her hour long address was, as she called it, the first Fourth of July oration by a woman West of the Rockies. Laura's lecture encompassed the spiritualist ideals of equality, independence and progress. She praised the

progress of the Pacific Railroad for connecting all people. She likened this benefit of the railroad to the formation of an American system modeled after the planetary system that judged people by their intelligence, not by their sex, race, creed or color. She advanced immutable notions of Spiritualism when she stated that the formation of any government must rest on principles of truth, justice and right.

Laura continued to travel through Nevada for the remainder of 1869. She was the first lecturer of any sex in White Pine, Nevada where she and Charles settled briefly after hearing reports that it was a rich mining town. While in Nevada, Laura never stopped lecturing. She also frequently met with mine owners, who she said were “devoted to our cause, the emancipation of human souls from every species of slavery.” As a spiritualist, Laura probably subscribed to this belief, but she was also intelligent enough to realize that this view could be manipulated and used to her advantage as a way to advance her suffrage views to a virtually all male society. After this point, Laura devoted herself to woman’s suffrage, but she did not only focus on the vote, but on equality as a whole for all human beings.

Settling in California: Journalism, Law and Suffrage, 1870 – 1893

Sometime in 1870 the Gordons settled in Mokelumne, California, which is now the city of Lodi in San Joaquin County. Charles became the town’s second physician, and Laura continued to lecture throughout the West, taking on a higher profile in the fight for woman’s suffrage, especially in California. Her Spiritualism was not so blatant during this period, perhaps because she did not want to divert her time and energy from woman’s rights. She may have also made a conscious decision to not flaunt her beliefs because California was becoming wary of

spiritualists. When she arrived in California, many viewed Spiritualism as an evil, and bemoaned its connection to woman's rights.⁴⁵

In 1870, the California State Woman Suffrage Society was formed, largely through Laura's efforts. Some biographies even credit her with its formation. Laura was not only a member of the Society, but took an extremely active part in its formation and policies. For example, Laura was concerned that the most liberal policies should be used to admit delegates to their convention, and urged women to "do business in a business-like way" and open their mouths and "vote audibly."⁴⁶ Laura was elected president of this Society in 1877, and again from 1884-1894.

Beginning in the 1870s, Laura focused her lecturing efforts on suffrage. She gave more than 100 speeches on suffrage in California in 1870 alone. She also returned to Virginia City to give lectures on "Woman's Enfranchisement," traveling with Emily Pitts Stevens, editor and publisher of the suffrage newspaper, "The Pioneer."⁴⁷ Laura's suffrage lectures were not as well attended as her earlier spiritualist lectures, perhaps due in part to the fact that Spiritualism had virtually died out in the area since Laura's last visit, so her lectures were not as highly anticipated. Nonetheless, while Laura was there, she met with a small group of women and formed a "little Woman's Suffrage society." Although Laura spoke almost exclusively on suffrage at this point, she does not appear to have deserted Spiritualism, and while in Virginia City, used the Spiritualist dial with Alfred Doten and Emily Pitts Stevens.

Whether or not publicly spiritualist, the ideals of Spiritualism were still present in Laura's suffrage lectures. Laura lectured along the Pacific Coast in the early 1870s, supporting woman's right to vote as a matter of divine law, and arguing that the fundamental principle of government should be equal privileges of citizenship. She not only talked of women garnering the vote, but

about equality as a whole, and how the vote was one stepping stone to achieving this purpose. She argued that suffrage would give women other advantages, such as allowing them to demand equal pay for their services. She advocated “broad and impartial suffrage” that should be denied no one, using the Indians as an example.⁴⁸ However, Laura did not include the Chinese in this appeal to equality. Laura speeches sometimes contained anti-Chinese elements. In her eyes, the Chinese were taking away jobs that should rightfully belong to women. Her views echoed the popular sentiment in California at the time, so these speeches probably brought her an audience that would also listen to her views on suffrage. It is incongruous that she could speak about total equality and speak specifically against one ethnic group. However, this is exactly what she did, and even though her anti-Chinese sentiment ran strong, she never stopped touting a holistic approach to equal rights.

Laura utilized many different opportunities to speak about equality. The San Joaquin County Independent Party nominated her for state senator in 1871 and she accepted by publicly discussing the need for total equality. She stated that she considered herself unworthy for the nomination, but would agree to run because the many wrongs that women encountered called for counteraction.⁴⁹ Through her senate run she received the opportunity to speak about equal rights and suffrage, but she also received a barrage of criticism and personal questions, some of which related to her past as a spiritualist. She was asked whether enfranchisement of women would lead to a deterioration of women’s maternal or conjugal relations and to free love. Many suffragists began distancing themselves from Spiritualism around this time because spiritualists were accused of embracing these notions of free love. Spiritualism did not cease to influence suffragists entirely, however. In 1871 Elizabeth Cady Stanton even wrote a letter to Victoria Woodhull, the famous spiritualist and prime public advocate of free love and asked her to contact

dead spirits to help with the fight for suffrage.⁵⁰ During her campaign, Laura was also asked whether or not she had ever been divorced. Spiritualists thought divorce was a way to get out of a bad marriage and achieve a higher marital status, but society looked upon divorce as an evil akin to free love and considered a divorced woman a tarnished woman. Laura was not divorced at this time, but when she divorced Charles in 1877 because she found out he already had a family in Scotland, she followed the convention of the day and referred to herself as a widow.

Laura lost the senate election, but continued to use all the means at her disposal to carry on the fight for equal rights. As one of the first woman public speakers in the United States, she was introduced to the public and professional realms that were usually occupied only by men. This introduction at such a young age gave her the opportunity and the confidence to try her hand at professions that were not welcoming to women. Laura's drive to spread the message of suffrage and equal rights, her desire to make money in order to carry on the cause, and her ability to permeate professional gender boundaries all contributed to her work as a journalist.

In 1873, Laura began to edit the woman's department of the *Narrow Gauge* in Stockton. In September of that same year she purchased and began publishing the *Stockton Weekly Leader* which she later turned into the *Stockton Daily Leader*, called the first daily paper in the West, sometimes the world, edited and published by a woman. She used these papers to advance the fight for suffrage and equality. After moving the *Leader* to Sacramento and selling it Laura became the editor of the *Daily Democrat* in Oakland, which she sold in 1878, around the time she applied to Hastings Law School.

Very few women were involved in the legal profession. Laura, along with another influential 19th century woman, Clara Shortridge Foltz, was refused admission to Hastings Law School on the basis of her sex. Laura and Clara sued Hastings, and eventually succeeded in

getting the State Constitution amended to allow any person over fourteen and of good moral character into public universities. They did not return to Hastings, however, but studied law on their own. They were admitted to the California State Bar in 1879 and Laura was the second woman admitted to the United States Supreme Court Bar in 1885. Laura began to practice law in San Francisco, where she was thought to have “drift[ed] into criminal practice” after her successful defense of a murder suspect, but her career choice more likely stemmed from her desire to make a difference in the world by protecting equality and insuring justice.⁵¹

In any event, Laura’s criminal trials gained much attention. Many spectators came to see this gifted female orator in court. Even in the practice of law Laura, consciously or subconsciously, managed to bring the equal rights issue to the forefront. In August of 1880, the San Francisco Chronicle covered her defense of a murder trial, titling their article, “Invasion of a Masculine Stronghold by a Champion of Women’s Rights.” The Chronicle noted that the nature of the crowd made it appear as if court had been put on hold to “accommodate a woman’s rights convention . . . such is the deep interest taken in woman’s gallant struggle to break the degrading bonds of ridiculous custom and meet and vanguish [sic] the male oppressor in any field.” The fact that Laura was a woman was more sensational than the trial itself. Laura not only knew the law, but also how to use her sex to her advantage to mesmerize the court and the crowd. In her closing address, while giving a convincing argument, Laura pulled her hair from its net and “[shook] her locks.” She also accepted a glass of water and “drank it to the last drop [while she was] watched with deep interest” Laura was a consummate show woman and used her skills strategically to enhance her legal arguments.⁵²

While she maintained a thriving law practice, Laura did not abandon her work for suffrage. She continued as president of the California Woman Suffrage Society, spoke at the

national suffrage convention in Washington D.C. in 1885, and traveled to Washington territory to help in the suffrage fight. She also frequently lobbied for bills in the California State Legislature, especially equal suffrage bills.

It appears that Laura stopped speaking on any given spiritualist topic during this time, although she did not publicly or privately denounce Spiritualism. She remained passionate about equality, divorced Charles, and was a true individual, especially professionally. These actions at least point to a spiritualist influence, if not active Spiritualism. Laura's immediate family members were still spiritualists. Her parents both died in 1883, and Laura hired spiritualist Addie Ballou to speak at her mother's funeral. Whether she actively communicated with spirits during this period of her life is a mystery. Even if not an active spiritualist, she did not sever all ties to Spiritualism. At the very least, she still had spiritualist ideals permeating her character and helping shape her into a strong, individual, independent woman

The Great Beyond, 1893 – 1907

Laura started out life as one of nine children, traveled extensively and made numerous friends, was married for fifteen years, and kept busy with speaking engagements, newspaper work, legal work, farming, the silk industry, and the fight for woman's rights. Laura never had time for a family of her own, or perhaps she never had the desire. This changed in 1893, when she adopted George Walker, the young son of a woman who had numerous children and could not care for them all.

By some accounts, the boy sought Laura and persisted in coming to her house until she agreed to adopt him. Other sources state that Laura took care of the boy and wanted him as her own, but his mother did not allow Laura to adopt him until her death.⁵³ Laura changed his name

to Verne Gordon, which he changed back after he became of age.⁵⁴ Adopting a young child seemed like an uncharacteristic move for Laura and no one understood why she would weigh herself down with this burden, but Laura said that Verne was her child in spirit. Through this spiritual connection, Laura filled a void in her life and “revealed the true mother side of her nature in a way that those who only knew her as a lawyer and orator little dreamed of.”

Even as a new mother, Laura did not limit her activities too much in the beginning. Sometimes she left Verne at home, but other times she brought him with her on her travels. The same year she adopted Verne, she attended the World’s Fair where she judged the silk exhibit and lectured on the silk worm industry.⁵⁵ She also continued to devote herself to suffrage and progressive causes, although she seemed somewhat saddened that she was not in the thick of the fight anymore. In a letter to a friend and fellow woman’s rights advocate, Clara Colby, Laura talked of missing her women friends and how all the original suffragists were going to leave this world. She wrote that “only a little time and we shall have to bid all the oldest workers ‘bon voyage’ to the great beyond. How precious are the moments while they are with us.”

In 1894, Laura was on the executive board of the Woman’s Congress, but she slowed down her public appearances for suffrage and woman’s rights after this time. She attended only one or two events until her death, including an appearance before the State Democratic Convention in 1906 where she succeeded in persuading the party to endorse women’s suffrage. Laura was also slowing down in other areas of her life. In 1901, she stopped practicing law to devote herself to managing her farm in Lodi, and giving Verne the “benefit of rural surroundings.” During this time when Laura was not as actively involved in suffrage and legal work and finally had some time for family and home, she appears to have become more in tune, or at least more open, with her spirituality.

Laura called upon her Spiritualism for comfort during a time of great sadness when three of her family members died within a five year period. Although Laura probably never abandoned Spiritualism, she put it on the back burner during her years of active suffrage and expressed it more openly during these later years. In 1901, Laura wrote to Clara Colby who had visited the day Laura's brother-in-law was buried. Laura was so dazed from the death that she was not even sure Clara had been there, except that she could still sense Clara's spirit in her home. She wrote that "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy."

Laura was even more vocal about the mysteries of life and the wonder of death after her grandniece died in 1904 or 1905. Again, she wrote to Clara Colby, talking about "Life, Death and the vast Forever," and the great "Father-Mother, God." She still believed in life beyond death and a nonmale, universal deity. However, she seemed to find little comfort in this belief.

With the third death, Laura became quite depressed. Verne had married Laura's niece, and their son, Laura's grandson, died in 1906 . This time Laura did not talk of the great beyond, but rather dwelled on the fact that her grandson was taken away and that his death had "nearly wrong the soul out of [her]." She even expressed that her interest in life was snapped.⁵⁶

Laura took a lecturing job with the Northern California Promotion Commission in 1907, perhaps in part to help alleviate sorrow and financial struggles. This intelligent and talented woman may have also felt the need to make a difference in the world again.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, Laura was unable to continue lecturing after she caught a cold while working in Los Angeles and had to return home. On April 5, 1907, Laura passed into the Great Beyond. She died from pneumonia at her sister's home in Lodi. Even in death, the legacy of Laura's spirit continued to

lead California women in the fight for suffrage. Due in large part to Laura's efforts, California women won the right to vote in 1911, nine years before the rest of the nation.

While a deeper look into Laura as a spiritualist adds a new dimension to her character and actions, it also poses new questions. Could Laura actually communicate with the dead? Did Laura believe she could communicate with the dead? Did Laura consciously use Spiritualism as a way to leave home, enter the professional realm, make her own money and finance her suffrage fight? Spiritualism legitimized her existence at the podium, but at the same time it easily could have de-legitimized her voice as a woman because she was only listened to precisely because she was not speaking her own words. I would argue that although Laura appropriated some of the century's views about women and used them to her advantage, she did not speak in a way that lessened her credibility. On the contrary, Laura did not deliver her speeches in a trance, but in her own voice – a voice that would fight for all women.

Laura was adept at using Spiritualism to her advantage when the situation warranted, or indirectly distancing herself in order to promote suffrage. She remained a true spiritualist at heart. She was a quintessential individual who never stopped pushing for equality. The impress of Laura's spirit runs deep through woman's history, although dormant for some time. Hopefully the time is near when we will look upon her spirit once again and learn from this remarkable woman.

¹ Unless specifically noted, basic biographical information in this paper is collected from the following sources: Gilb, Corrine L., "Laura de Force Gordon," in *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, vol. 2, p.68-69 (Harvard University Press, 1971); Virginia G. Drachman, *Women lawyers and the origins of professional identity in America: the letters of the Equity Club, 1887 to 1890* (University of Michigan Press 1993); Dawn Bradley Berry, *The 50 most influential women in American law* (Lowell House 1996); Maurice Hill and Ralph Lea, *Laura DeForce Gordon*, *LODI HISTORIAN*, Summer 1993; Loree Cook, *Thesis on Laura de Force*

Gordon at the Cesar Chavez branch of the San Joaquin County Library in Stockton; Renee Frances Hawkins, *Laura De Force Gordon: Fragments of a Feminist Pioneer* (1997) (Women's Legal History Project Website); Interview with Judge Rolleen McIlwrath, San Joaquin County Superior Court Judge, in Stockton, Cal. (January 2000)

According to Judge McIlwrath, who has been researching and collecting information for a biography of Laura de Force Gordon, not all information in the Lodi Historian is necessarily accurate.

² Unless otherwise noted, information in this section about spiritualism is from Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Beacon Press, 1989)

³ Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

⁴ The information in this paragraph comes from pamphlet found in Laura's papers. "How Can Spiritualists Associate Together To Do The Most Good?" Miscellaneous items, "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁵ Nancy F. Cott, *History of Women in the United States, Vol. 13: Religion* (K.G. Saur 1993).

⁶ For more information on the notion of free love and its differing connotations, see Goldsmith, *supra*. *See also* John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Harper & Row, 1988).

⁷ *See also* Cott, *supra* at 213; Goldsmith, *supra* at 35.

⁸ Goldsmith, *supra* at 35.

⁹ Cott, *supra* at 217. Lizzie Doten was a friend and spiritualist contemporary of Laura de Force Gordon. They often shared billing at lectures.

¹⁰ Goldsmith, *supra* at 35.

¹¹ Cott, *supra* at 215.

¹² Goldsmith, *supra* at 48.

¹³ Robert J. Chandler, "Eliza Ann Hurd Dewolf: An Early Case for Cross-dressing," 11 *The Californians* 2 (Sept/Oct. 1993)

¹⁴ Hawkins, *supra* at 5.

¹⁵ Robert J. Chandler, "In the Van: Spiritualists as Catalysts for the California Women's Suffrage Movement," 73 *California History* 188 (Fall 1994)

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *See* Hawkins, *supra* at 3 for biographical information about Laura's family history.

¹⁸ Braude, *supra*.

¹⁹ There is a discrepancy among different biographical sources regarding at what age Laura began trance speaking. The differences range from a very early age to 17 years old, but most agree that she began trance speaking at around 15 years old.

²⁰ Michael Fitzgerald, *Lodian Pressed Ahead for Future of Woman*, The San Joaquin Record, March 25, 1998, at D1.

²¹ Interview with Judge McIlwrath, *supra*.

²² See Robert J. Chandler, "Emma Hardinge: A Spiritual Voice for the Slave and the Union," 29 *Dogtown Territorial Quarterly* (Spring 1997) in which the author notes that Laura de Force Gordon was sometimes inspired by the spirit of Senator Edward D. Baker. This is the only mention I found of any particular spirit that communicated with Laura. This would be an interesting avenue to pursue.

²³ There is also some discrepancy about when she began touring as a speaker, ranging from 15 to 19 years old.

²⁴ Hill, *supra* at 101.

²⁵ Christi Kennedy and Ralph Lea, *Controversial female pioneer to be honored Saturday at Woman's Club*, Lodi News-Sentinel, no date 1997, at 1.

²⁶ Hill, *supra* at 101. Any additional information about this group would surely provide insight into Laura's exposure to various reform ideals during her early years. Did she have an active role? What does it mean to represent? What did the group stand for?

²⁷ Letter from Frank Tallmadge, December 20, 1858, "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²⁸ Letter from Frank Tallmadge, February 17, 1859, *Id.*

²⁹ Letters from Frank Tallmadge, December 20, 1858 and January 6, 1859, *Id.*

³⁰ Letter from Frank Tallmadge, May 6, 1859, *Id.*

³¹ See Braude, *supra*; Goldsmith, *supra*, for discussion of how spiritualists may have been able to speak on such a wide variety of topics.

³² Letter from H. Link, October 4, 1864, "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Note that this name was terribly hard to read and could either be Link or Lirik.

³³ Letter from Lizzie Doten, February 2, 1864, *Id.*

³⁴ Letter from Frank Tallmadge, December 20, 1858, *Id.*

³⁵ Letter from H. Link, July 6, 1861, *Id.*

³⁶ Letter from H. Link, postmarked 1864, *Id.*

³⁷ Letter from Charles H. Gordon, 1863, *Id.* These letters are incredibly hard to decipher, but with hard work, would provide valuable insight into their early relationship. In letters from 1863, Charles addressed her quite fondly and often told her that he missed her and wished she would visit. It would be interesting to see if the tone of the letters change as they are married longer. Unfortunately, Charles did not save his letters from Laura, so the exercise would be somewhat one-sided.

³⁸ This would be an interesting avenue to pursue because Charles was a doctor, and as a whole, the male medical establishment generally spoke out against spiritualism. See Braude, *supra*.

³⁹ Robert J. Chandler, "In the Van: Spiritualists as Catalysts for the California Women's Suffrage Movement," 73 *California History* 188 (Fall 1994) at 194.

⁴⁰ Id.

⁴¹ Walter Van Tilburg Clark, *The Journals of Alfred Doten, 1849 – 1903*, vol. 2 (University of Nevada Press, 1973). The information in this section about Laura’s travels and lectures is first-hand from Alfred Doten’s journals unless otherwise noted. Doten mentioned Laura in various journal entries from November 28, 1867 to August 16, 1870.

⁴² *Laura De Force Gordon: Lodi’s suffrage powerhouse*, *The San Joaquin Record*, no date, at D1.

⁴³ Although Laura is considered a trance speaker, in my research, this is the only first hand account I have come across of Laura actually in a trance.

⁴⁴ Unless otherwise noted, information about Laura’s visit to Austin and the Ophir Canyon Mining Camp is found in Hill, *supra*.

⁴⁵ See Chandler, *supra* for a discussion of the climate for Spiritualism in California at this time.

⁴⁶ Cook, *supra* at 4.

⁴⁷ Unless otherwise noted, information about Laura’s return to Virginia City is found in *The Journals of Alfred Doten, supra*. See Chandler, *supra* at 201 for a discussion of how the WSA charged Emily Pitts Stevens with advocating “free love,” causing her to leave the movement. It would be interesting to find out if Laura was involved in this matter.

⁴⁸ *Woman Suffrage*, *The New Northwest*, August 18, 1871 at page 1.

⁴⁹ *Mrs. Gordon’s Letter of Acceptation*, *The New Northwest*, August 11, 1871.

⁵⁰ Goldsmith, *supra* at 255.

⁵¹ See Lelia J. Robinson, “Women Lawyers in the United States” (2 *Green Bag* 1890).

⁵² The information in this section is found in: *For His Life. The Trial of Saldee in Judge Ferral’s Court*, S.F. Chronicle, August 1880, at page 4; *A Forensic Female: Appearance of a Lady Lawyer in a Murder Case. Invasion of a Masculine Stronghold by a Champion of Women’s Rights - - Her Experience*, S.F. Chronicle, August 12, 1880, at page 3; *Triumphant Woman. Victory of The Champion of Female Equality*, S.F. Chronicle, August 1880, at page 4.

⁵³ See Hill, *supra*; Clara Colby, *The Woman’s Tribune*, May 25, 1907.

⁵⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all further information is found in Colby, *supra*.

⁵⁵ Christi Kennedy and Ralph Lea, *Controversial female pioneer to be honored Saturday at Woman’s Club*, Lodi News-Sentinel, no date 1997, at 1. There is an oral interview with Merle Hieb, a descendant of George Walker, on tape at the San Joaquin County Historical Society & Museum at Micke Grove in Lodi.

⁵⁶ Shortly after Laura’s death, she was described as “agnostic in religion, with leanings toward Theosophy.” See Hawkins, *supra* at 6. Perhaps these tragedies shook her faith somewhat. Theosophy is not that far removed from spiritualism. It sprang from the same reform ideals and touted equality. In essence they were very similar religions, with theosophists believing in magic and the occult as well as the spirit world. See Cott, *supra* at 221 for a discussion of Theosophy.

⁵⁷ See Colby, *supra*. Laura wrote to Clara Colby that she wanted to benefit the world. She “long[ed] to ‘do noble things, not dream them all day long.’”

APPENDIX B: SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As I was researching the spiritualist aspects of Laura de Force Gordon's life, I found it somewhat difficult to stay on task. Any study of one part of her prolific life turns up information from other areas. These suggestions for further research include sources relating to Spiritualism as well as leads from other areas of her life that I came across during this process.

1. I found a variety of websites that would be helpful for any study of Laura de Force Gordon:
 - The Erie County Public Library website has basic historical information about the area. There is also a genealogical department that will run a basic search. I requested information about a search on Laura and the de Force family, but have not yet received any results. The website is: www.ecls.lib.pa.us
 - The San Joaquin County Genealogical Society has a website with information and links to genealogical information in the area: www.rootsweb.com/~sjgs/links.htm
 - There is a great source for research about women's history in a particular geographical region. This is the web address specifically for Pennsylvania, but it will take you to other regions as well. It would be particularly interesting to see if there is any information about Laura, as a spiritualist or otherwise, in Wisconsin from the time her family managed a boarding house there. American Women's History : A Research Guide, State and Regional History: <http://frank.mtsu.edu/~kmiddlet/history/women/wh-state.html#PA>
 - The National American Women's Suffrage Association home page: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/rbnawsahtml/nawshome.html>

2. Laura's papers are housed at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. Along with miscellaneous items, there are files of letters from 54 different correspondents. There are very few letters from Laura in this collection. It would be helpful to see if any of her correspondents have letters from her in their collections. For a study of Laura's Spiritualism, letters to Lizzie Doten, Frank Tallmadge, and H. Link would be especially interesting. There are quite a lot of letters in Laura's collection and they are very hard to decipher. As such, I only looked over the files that would most likely contain information about Spiritualism, but a study of all the letters would surely provide a more accurate picture of Laura.

3. Judge Rolleen McIlwrath, of Stockton, California is a great source. She has been studying Laura for a number of years and has a large collection of sources. For those that want a tactile connection to Laura, Judge McIlwrath even has Laura's chair in her home. The best way to reach her is by e-mail: rkentmc@mediaone.net

4. Ann Gordon has also been collecting information about Laura. She is quite difficult to reach, so I would recommend contacting her early in the process. Her e-mail address is: agordon@rci.rutgers.edu

5. There is an oral interview with Merle Hieb, one of George Walker/Verne Gordon's descendants at the San Joaquin County Historical Society and Museum at Micke Grove in Lodi.

6. Laura is mentioned in the book, Red Blood Black Ink, by David Dary, but is only given one paragraph. However, for a study of Laura as a newspaper woman and the atmosphere surrounding journalism at that time, this is a valuable source.

7. In Search of White Crows, by R. Laurence Moore is a good source for the study of women and Spiritualism.

8. Of course, one of the greatest sources would be Laura's diary that she kept during her early days on the spiritualist lecture circuit. Someone from the San Joaquin County Historical Society may be able to help in securing this.

9. The Bancroft Library also houses a collection of petitions, speeches, and other materials that pertain to women's rights.

10. *The Carrier Dove*, *The Spiritualist*, and *The Golden Dawn* were journals edited by women that were devoted to both Spiritualism and suffrage. I was unable to locate these materials.

11. Laura is mentioned in Barbara Goldsmith's biography of Victoria Woodhull, *Other Powers*. I recommend reading this book for a sense of how the acceptance of Spiritualism changed throughout the latter part of the 19th century. It would also be helpful to check biographies of other women spiritualists for any mention of Laura.

12. Pennsylvania Newspapers that are housed at the Erie County Public Library:

- *Erie City Dispatch*: February 1863 – July 1866; 1867; January through October 1868
- *Erie Dispatch*: May 23, 1864 – March 12, 1866; April 3 – November 24 1866; May 1868 – 1869
- *Erie Gazette*: 1835 – 1874
- *Erie Observer*: May 29, 1830 – December 22, 1860; 1863 – 1878

13. Maurice Hill, of the San Joaquin County Historical Society, is reportedly writing a book, *DeForce Sisters*.

14. Article in the San Francisco Morning Call regarding Laura arguing against a local dive ordinance. February 19, 1880, page one: *A Test Case*.

15. See the following articles on Spiritualism from *The Californians*, Volume 11, No. 2. For information on how to find these materials, contact Robert J. Chandler, Wells Fargo Bank Historical Services, 415 – 396 – 2022:

- "Science, Seance and San Francisco: The Spiritualists' Phantom Fandango" by Daniel Herman
- "Women Mediums and Women's Rights" by Daniel Herman
- "Midnight Disclosures" by Daniel Herman

16. See Ann Braude, "Notes from the Spirit World: A Checklist of American Spiritualist Periodicals, 1847 – 1900," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*.

17. Donna C. Schuele, "Community Property Law and the Politics of Married Woman's Rights in Nineteenth-Century California," *Western Legal History* 7 (Summer/Fall 1994). Laura's work is included in this piece.

18. The Sacramento Bee from 1872 – 1878 reportedly covered Laura's lobbying efforts.

19. The appellate courthouse library in Sacramento possesses some information about Laura.

20. Copies of all information I have acquired during this research, whether or not utilized in my paper, will be in the Laura de Force Gordon file of the Women's Legal History Project box. Contact Professor Barbara Babcock for information on how to access these materials.

**APPENDIX A:
BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Berry, Dawn Bradley, *The 50 most influential women in American law* (Lowell House 1996)

Braude, Ann, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Beacon Press, 1989)

Chandler, Robert J., "Eliza Ann Hurd Dewolf: An Early Case for Cross-dressing," 11 *The Californians* 2 (Sept/Oct. 1993)

Chandler, Robert J., "Emma Hardinge: A Spiritual Voice for the Slave and the Union," 29 *Dogtown Territorial Quarterly* (Spring 1997)

Chandler, Robert J., "In the Van: Spiritualists as Catalysts for the California Women's Suffrage Movement," 73 *California History* 188 (Fall 1994)

Clark, Walter Van Tilburg, *The Journals of Alfred Doten, 1849 – 1903, vol. 2* (University of Nevada Press, 1973)

Colby, Clara, *The Woman's Tribune*, May 25, 1907

Cook, Loree, Thesis on Laura de Force Gordon at the Cesar Chavez branch of the San Joaquin County Library in Stockton

Cott, Nancy F., *History of Women in the United States, Vol. 13: Religion* (K.G. Saur 1993)

D'Emilio, John and Freedman, Estelle B., *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Harper & Row, 1988)

Drachman, Virginia G., *Women lawyers and the origins of professional identity in America: the letters of the Equity Club, 1887 to 1890* (University of Michigan Press 1993)

A Forensic Female: Appearance of a Lady Lawyer in a Murder Case. Invasion of a Masculine Stronghold by a Champion of Women's Rights - - Her Experience, S.F. Chronicle, August 12, 1880

For His Life. The Trial of Saldee in Judge Ferral's Court, S.F. Chronicle, August 1880

Gilb, Corrine L., "Laura de Force Gordon," in *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, vol. 2, p.68-69 (Harvard University Press, 1971)

Fitzgerald, Michael, *Lodian Pressed Ahead for Future of Woman*, The San Joaquin Record, March 25, 1998, at D1

Goldsmith, Barbara, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull*, (Alfred A. Knopf , 1998)

Hawkins, Renee Frances, *Laura De Force Gordon: Fragments of a Feminist Pioneer* (1997) (Women's Legal History Project Website)

Hill, Maurice and Lea, Ralph, *Laura DeForce Gordon*, LODI HISTORIAN, Summer 1993

"How Can Spiritualists Associate Together To Do The Most Good?" Miscellaneous items, "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

Interview with Judge Rolleen McIlwrath, San Joaquin County Superior Court Judge, in Stockton, Cal. (January 2000)

Kennedy, Christi and Lea, Ralph, *Controversial female pioneer to be honored Saturday at Woman's Club*, Lodi News-Sentinel, no date 1997

Laura De Force Gordon: Lodi's suffrage powerhouse, The San Joaquin Record, no date, at D1

Letter from Lizzie Doten, February 2, 1864, "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

Letters from Charles H. Gordon, 1863, "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

Letters from H. Link, "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

Letters from Frank Tallmadge, "Laura de Force Gordon Correspondence and Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

Mrs. Gordon's Letter of Acceptation, The New Northwest, August 11, 1871

Triumphant Woman. Victory of The Champion of Female Equality, S.F. Chronicle, August 1880

Woman Suffrage, The New Northwest, August 18, 1871