Unseen Influence: Lucretia Blankenburg and the Rise of Philadelphia Reform Politics in 1911

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In April of 1917 Lucretia Blankenburg looked back at her long career as one of Philadelphia's preeminent reformers, a career that had culminated with her husband Rudolph's 1911 election as mayor of Philadelphia. On this day, she recalled, "Mr. Blankenburg and I consecrated ourselves to his service for the city. . . . I think we proved the city could be run on business principles." "It was characteristic of Mrs. Blankenburg that she said 'we,'" the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin's reporter noted, "for in every activity of her husband's she has kept pace with some interest of her own." Mrs. Blankenburg's reference to her husband's political service reflected gender roles that denied women a place in public life. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Rudolph Blankenburg led Philadelphia's male reformers in the electoral realm, while his wife became a leading clubwoman. But a close examination of Lucretia Blankenburg's life reveals how she and many other Philadelphia women more than kept pace with male reformers. Women proved to be the decisive factor in electing Rudolph Blankenburg mayor in 1911. Their maternalist emphasis on "civic housecleaning" provided the dark horse reformer with a powerful new campaign appeal. More importantly the dense network of women's clubs and organizations that Lucretia Blankenburg had helped build served as her husband's de facto political organization during the campaign's home stretch. As his machine rival relied upon regular Republican organizations and funds, Rudolph Blankenburg drew upon clubwomen's volunteer efforts and their feminine claim to the moral high ground. Nevertheless women remained largely invisible in the campaign. Machine Republicans never knew what hit them and, indeed, male reformers failed to give women credit for their efforts.
4. Above, A pro-reform cartoon portrays Rudolph Blankenburg as a vigorous female housecleaner. This image mirrored the label of the popular national brand "Old Dutch Cleanser" (Review of Reviews, November 1896, p. 544).

This essay records women reformers’ contributions to reform’s 1911 victory in Philadelphia. But it also reexamines the bases of maternalist politics itself.

The Centennial Exposition of 1876 brought the nation to Philadelphia to marvel at the massive Corliss steam engine and its other harbingers of industrial modernity. But it also spurred the residents of Philadelphia to civic activism. The Quaker City had become, in the words of a later muckraking journalist, “corrupt and contented.” While the Centennial Exposition largely joined in this chorus, it also drew a number of Philadelphia’s elite citizens to notice their city’s shortcomings. Among their leaders were the young Rudolph and Lucretia Blankenburg, she a daughter of leading Philadelphia Quakers, he a German immigrant intent upon taking his new political freedoms seriously.

Lucretia Longshore was born in 1845, the daughter of a teacher and one of the nation’s first woman physicians. Her parents became leaders in Philadelphia’s reform community, working for women’s rights and the abolition of slavery, and named their daughter in honor of Lucretia Mott. Young Lucretia observed the discrimination and poor treatment her mother received as a pioneer among physicians and resolved to continue her fight for equal opportunity. Her family’s life also brought out other talents in the young woman. The Longshores’ busy careers thrust many household duties upon their daughter, who managed the home and discovered that she did it well. “Here I learned to buy and sell,” she recalled. “I kept my mother’s books. My father, too, cooperated in every way. It is impossible to make a success of public life unless the family cooperates.”

Hannah Longshore’s medical career inspired her daughter’s later reform work, but Lucretia did not follow in her mother’s professional footsteps. After one year’s training, she abandoned medicine and enrolled in bookkeeping classes at Philadelphia’s Bryant and Stratton Commercial College. In 1865 Lucretia’s life took another major turn when young Rudolph Blankenburg knocked on the family’s door bearing a relative’s letter of introduction. The son of a German Reformed minister, he had been educated for the ministry himself. He was a large, hearty man with a booming voice and a ready smile. After finding employment as a traveling salesman for the textile house of William H. Horstman and Sons, he married Lucretia in 1867.

The Blankenburgs made a dynamic couple. First they turned their attention to the business world. In 1875 he channeled Longshore family capital toward the inauguration of his own textile business, producing yarns, quilts, and spreads. A natural promoter and leader, he easily made new business contacts and quickly built his mill into a larger concern. Lucretia Blankenburg kept the firm’s books and directed many of its financial dealings. Her natural abilities as a manager and her bookkeeping training made her a valuable business asset
and freed Rudolph for the personal and promotional work he performed so well.

The 1876 Centennial Exposition provided an opportunity for the Blankenburgs to take up the reform work they had often discussed. The exposition relied upon volunteers to organize the proceedings, and upon the event's completion these citizens carried their organizing zeal to the causes of charitable relief and political reform. Rudolph Blankenburg stepped to the fore. In 1878 he became one of the founding members of the new Society for Organizing Charitable Relief. Three years later he took his place on the new Committee of One Hundred, an organization of national Republicans devoted to challenging the city's political machine for municipal control. The Committee of One Hundred and its succeeding organizations enjoyed few electoral successes. Nevertheless Rudolph became a popular reform leader in Philadelphia. His persistent optimism and good cheer in the face of unremitting political setbacks earned him the sobriquet "the warhorse of reform."5

While Rudolph labored in the realm of Republican electoral politics, Lucretia Blankenburg became a leader among Philadelphia's clubwomen and reformers. She also began bookkeeping instruction in the New Century Club's night school curriculum and founded a new organization for the city's working women.6 Prevailing class boundaries prevented elite women from welcoming working and immigrant women into their own organization, but Lucretia Blankenburg led the way in organizing the New Century Guild for working women. The parent club could not financially support the new guild for long, so Lucretia set about to secure its financial stability. After considerable research she led the club to purchase two houses on Arch Street in downtown Philadelphia. The club succeeded in renting one at sufficient profit to allow it to provide the other as the new guild's clubhouse; the properties were eventually sold at a large profit, providing the New Century Guild with an endowment of twenty-five thousand dollars. Lucretia Blankenburg's considerable business acumen had helped create a new organization that came to boast over seven hundred members, its own clubhouse, a library, assembly hall, and cafe.7

Upon joining the New Century Club in 1878, Lucretia Blankenburg also renewed her long-dormant interest in woman suffrage. In 1892, after years of grass-roots organizing and activism, she became president of the Pennsylvania Woman Suffrage Association, a post she held for sixteen years. In 1908 the General Federation of Women's Clubs elected Lucretia its auditor, and she led the effort to bring that organization around to the support of woman suffrage. Work in the New Century Club and woman's suffrage movement trained Lucretia Blankenburg to move on to other reform activities. Unlike the par-
artisan political world, the new network of women's organizations offered an arena for a viable career in reform.  

Lucretia first organized the Smoke Nuisance Committee. She recalled that "after careful study of the question we discovered that the smoke nuisance could be abated by the use of mechanical appliances." Committee members visited offending businesses and persuaded many of them to install appliances. "Our argument," she recalled, "was based on the facts that housekeeping was the largest industry in Philadelphia, that the destruction of clothes and household furnishings by smoke cost thousands of dollars annually, and that smoke-laden air was irritating to the lungs and should be eliminated as far as possible." The members of the committee employed the Progressive Era's familiar maternalist appeal to "civic housecleaning" and efficiency. Yet an analysis of their appeal reveals none of the usual references to morality, children, and caregiving. Rather Lucretia Blankenburg characterized housekeeping as a business, discussing cost and efficiency. Experience as a bookkeeper and businesswoman influenced her interpretation of housekeeping itself and enhanced her feminine political appeal. These activities must significantly affect our understanding of women and Progressive politics. While many brought their experiences as mothers and caregivers to the political realm in order to argue for a new maternalist state apparatus, others like Lucretia Blankenburg drew upon their business experience to demand efficiency and accountability from businessmen and politicians.

In the 1890s Philadelphia's clubwomen began to gain real influence in the electoral arena. In 1894 Pennsylvania Republican boss Quay selected the young Boies Penrose to become the next mayor of Philadelphia. Penrose was possessed of an appreciable intellect and equally considerable appetites for food, drink, salty oaths, and other pleasures. In Philadelphia's seedy political climate he made no attempt to conceal his activities. But the Penrose candidacy proved "more than the women of the city could tolerate." A committee of women circulated a petition declaring that "We, the women citizens of Philadelphia, ask for the nomination of a candidate for Mayor whose private life shows a high moral standard and whose mature character and experience in business affairs will ensure a good administration." Many leading women, including Lucretia Blankenburg, signed the petition, as did a number of reform-oriented Republican men. Rudolph Blankenburg, in a typical stroke of promotional genius, printed hundreds of oversize yellow posters of the petition and attached them to fences and billboards around the city on the eve of the Republican nominating convention. The posters omitted the word "women" in the bold-faced type, but included all two hundred signatures. Republican officials could
plainly see that these leading Philadelphia Republicans found Penrose offensive and unprepared for office. In the city convention they nominated Charles F. Warwick for mayor.\footnote{10}

The successful derailment of Penrose's mayoral candidacy marked a rare electoral victory for the city's reform community. For fifteen years Philadelphia's reformers failed to build upon this political triumph. But they continued to share common goals and build a strong partnership that would later bear fruit. As early as 1890 Rudolph and Lucretia Blankenburg had succeeded in opening elite reform functions to women as well as men. These events then became opportunities to compare notes, share ideas, and formulate plans. In this atmosphere the Philadelphia reform community grew and prospered. Women reformers, assured of their place in the larger effort, moved forward to new innovations that would prove useful in the future.\footnote{11}

When Rudolph Blankenburg announced his intention to run for mayor of Philadelphia in 1911, almost no one gave him a chance to win. The warhorse of reform was sixty-eight years of age. Boies Penrose, who had secured election to the United States Senate in the Republican sweep of 1896, now administered the Pennsylvania machine with fearsome precision. Yet Blankenburg swept to victory. Why? A major rift in the Republican Party explains much of the result.\footnote{12} But electoral success in 1911 remained a daunting challenge. Penrose had perfected the techniques of fraud and intimidation and commanded a legion of loyal voters and political operatives. Philadelphia's electorally oriented reformers had built their Keystone Party around a minuscule group of elite professionals and men of affairs and lacked any viable political organization. In these circumstances the reform community's two wings came together as never before to seize their rare opportunity and secure the election of Rudolph Blankenburg. Philadelphia's clubwomen stepped into party politics and provided the Blankenburg campaign with its political style and organization.

Blankenburg's fortunes benefited from the familiar technique of women's influence in the home. Clubwomen steadily lobbied their husbands, sons, and uncles on behalf of his candidacy. Inventive women reached out into the Black and working-class communities, and domestic servants carried Blankenburg campaign literature into the homes they served. In the public realm the Blankenburg campaign drew upon the suffrage movement's growing momentum and proven political style. Blankenburg marshaled massive marches and rallies, often organized largely by women who had orchestrated the suffrage movement's own use of these mass techniques.\footnote{13}

In addition to these women's activities, the Blankenburgs crafted a feminine aspect for Rudolph's hale-and-hearty political image. On the stump he emphasized maternalist themes of good city management and civic purity. Blanken-
Women also provided Rudolph Blankenburg with his political organization. Their clubs provided a ready-made network of volunteers for a candidate without party machinery behind him. For nearly a decade before the election, the women of the Philadelphia Civic Club (where Lucretia Blankenburg was also a member) had organized the city's Black, immigrant, and working citizens on a ward-by-ward basis for the ostensible purposes of civic education. In 1905 women reformers and clubwomen had also formed a Women's City Party to parallel the men's City Party. In 1911 these organizations sprang to life as electoral entities. Clubwomen formed the Women's Permanent Committee for Good Government. Women from a number of clubs made house-to-house canvasses of the city, raised funds, and organized motor pools and other logistics on behalf of the Blankenburg campaign.16

Lucretia Blankenburg undoubtedly organized many of these activities on her husband's behalf, yet she remained hesitant to elaborate upon her role in the election. Later she revealed her ambivalent feelings when she recalled how the city's women mobilized for the campaign: "When they did that, I felt that I ought to step aside and keep quiet." But she went on to admit that "of course they met with me often and I suppose I sort of egged them on."17 In part this attitude reflected her reserved nature. While an intrepid organizer and leader, Lucretia Blankenburg remained disarmingly self-deprecating. Certainly this posture reflected the era's prevailing constructions of feminine modesty. But Lucretia's reticence also reflected a native shrewdness in political affairs borne out immediately upon her husband's election.

Although women helped her husband's campaign in many ways, Lucretia Blankenburg also realized that Rudolph needed the support of other regular Republicans. To take an active role in campaign activities would risk marking
her husband, already running an innovative campaign appealing to women, as unmasculine and hence suspect in the all-male electoral realm. Her strategy worked. Despite Rudolph’s creative use of feminine imagery, machine leaders declined to attack him as ineffectual or effeminate. This in part reflected Rudolph’s vigorous and hearty presence on the stump and his citywide popularity. But it also reflected his wife’s reticence.

Only upon Rudolph Blankenburg’s election did machine Republicans wake up to his unusual political partnership. While the city’s machine newspapers mouthed platitudes about cooperation, Penrose’s spokesmen issued histrionic press releases proclaiming that Mrs. Blankenburg, and not her husband, would run the new administration. Of the country’s major newspapers, only the Chicago Tribune gave the story any credence. It ran an article asking “Woman as Ruler in Philadelphia?” “Rudolph Blankenburg yesterday was elected mayor,” it began, “but it will be theories of his wife, a suffragist, which will be put into practice during his term.” This attack vividly illustrates the type of response Lucretia Blankenburg assiduously avoided during the campaign. While she remained in the shadows, Rudolph reaped the benefits of the clubwomen’s organization and a feminine political style without tangible backlash.

Machine Republicans simply failed to notice Philadelphia clubwomen’s large-scale organization on behalf of Rudolph Blankenburg. From the perspective of their all-male political clubs and party events, the women’s organization seemed invisible. But machine men were not alone in failing to discern the real causes behind Rudolph Blankenburg’s election. Giddy with victory, reform men marveled at the outcome. United States Senator Robert LaFollette of Wisconsin, himself a warhorse of reform, wrote to congratulate Blankenburg upon his victory “without organization.” The morning after Blankenburg’s election, the pro-reform North American concluded that “All the organization he had was the volunteering of the men of the mills, and the shops, and the college.”

Philadelphia’s male and female reformers built parallel organizations in the years between the Centennial Exposition of 1876 and the 1911 mayoral election. Although they shared a similar agenda emphasizing municipal efficiency, public morality, and woman suffrage, the period’s prevailing gender roles and women’s wholesale exclusion from the franchise effectively divided them. While Philadelphia’s male reformers struggled to challenge the city’s powerful Republican machine, Lucretia Blankenburg and the city’s clubwomen honed their political skills in the fight for woman suffrage and turned their clubs to other political ends. In 1911 this shadow organization of clubs and clubwomen broke through into electoral politics and propelled Rudolph Blankenburg to the mayor’s office. Their practiced maternalist appeals to morality and
efficiency provided the Blankenburg campaign with its central theme. The city's women also used their persuasive powers to promote the warhorse of reform. But most importantly the clubwomen provided Rudolph Blankenburg with the army of volunteers only political parties had been able to provide in the past. Thus the clubwomen of Philadelphia blunted the Republican machine's greatest advantages, allowed their candidate to make the most of his opponents' disarray, and recorded a rare victory for reform in the Quaker City.

Unfortunately the same assumptions that blinded machine Republicans and municipal reformers alike to these women's political roles have afflicted recent work in women's history. As scholars have turned to consider women's political activities in the years before the Nineteenth Amendment, they have emphasized women's activities within their separate sphere, primarily their unique ability to influence political discourse, policymaking, and state building, without investigating the possibility of women's grass-roots electoral activities. This has led to the elaboration of a new argument emphasizing two Progressivisms in America, one a primarily masculine corporate liberalism built around the model of the business enterprise, the other a feminine progressivism (with a small "p") built from women's nineteenth-century concerns for caregiving, social welfare, and social purity. It candidly assigns the blame for modern America's ills to the corporate liberalism of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, while concluding that "almost everything that we find admirable about the Progressive Era appears to have been associated in one way or another with women reformers carrying out the politics associated in the nineteenth century with women's domestic concerns."

This scholarly dichotomy succumbs to the same assumptions and ideal types that obscured Lucretia Blankenburg and the Philadelphia clubwomen's role in Philadelphia politics for so long. While research for this essay has illuminated Blankenburg's important political work, it has also revealed new aspects of the politics women built before the Nineteenth Amendment. Women's experiences in business exercised an unseen influence upon the development of their politics in the Progressive Era. Some, like Lucretia Blankenburg, found their way to responsibility in private firms. Gilded Age women's clubs also provided opportunities for women to hone their business acumen. In new organizations such as the Smoke Nuisance Committee, they anchored the familiar feminine "housekeeping" metaphor in basic appeals to efficiency and cost. When we uncover women's complex political ideas and their roles in partisan politics, the idea of "two progressivisms" begins to unravel; men and women often worked together, as partners with common ideals and motivations, in the quest for a modern American order.
NOTES


3. See The Blankenburgs of Philadelphia, 108; for details of Lucretia's educational experiences, see the Notable American Women biographical sketch.


7. See Bennett, "Lucretia Blankenburg," 21, and a similar account in Bennett, "Lucretia L. Blankenburg," in American Women in the Civic Work, chap. 9; also see her memoir in The Blankenburgs of Philadelphia. Also see significant obituaries in the New York Times, New York Herald-Tribune, and all of the major Philadelphia newspapers, all dated March 29, 1937.

8. Lucretia Blankenburg did not enter reform activities as an accomplished public figure. When called upon to present her first paper before the New Century Club, she demurred and asked a friend to read it instead. But work in the suffrage movement trained her for public life. Susan B. Anthony offered her public speaking lessons, and the basic political activities of the movement provided increased self-confidence. See The Blankenburgs of Philadelphia, 114–15.


10. See The Blankenburgs of Philadelphia, 15–16, for quotation and an account of this episode.


12. For details of the Republican schism, see "John Burt, Big Vare Supporter, Turns in for Blankenburg," Philadelphia North American, October 10, 1911; "Vare Leaders from 15 Wards
Out for Blankenburg,” Philadelphia North American, October 13, 1911; “Revolt of Vare Men Hits the Northwest; Blankenburg Gaining,” Philadelphia North American, October 26, 1911; see also the Evening Bulletin of November 8, 1911, which reported “Blankenburg Strong in South Philadelphia.” For general accounts of the campaign and Blankenburg’s election, see Fox, “Philadelphia Progressives,” and Donald Disbrow, “Reform in Philadelphia under Mayor Blankenburg.” For an exhaustive electoral report of the Philadelphia wards, see the Philadelphia North American of November 9, 1911, as well as the Evening Bulletin of the same date.


14. For an account of these activities and a copy of the photograph, see Helen Christine Bennett, “Interesting People: The Mayor of Philadelphia,” American Magazine (November 1913).


18. “Woman as Ruler of Philadelphia?” Chicago Tribune, November 9, 1911. The article announced that Lucretia had declared that “Now I will have the opportunity of putting some of my theories into practice.” A review of local newspapers finds no such public utterances by Mrs. Blankenburg.
