

Sara Yorke Stevenson 1847- 1922 by Barbara S. Lesko

The first curator of the Egyptian Section of the University of Pennsylvania's Free Museum of Science and Art (now known as the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology), Sara Yorke Stevenson was a wealthy Philadelphian lady who had become a member of the American branch of the Egypt Exploration Fund, founded by Amelia B. Edwards (q.v.) in London in 1882. That Mrs. Stevenson had such an important position at the Museum at such an early time was due in part to the enlightened Dr. William Pepper, Provost of the University, who was also involved with developing the archaeological interests of Phoebe Apperson Hearst (q.v.). Thus two wealthy, intelligent, and managerial women on opposite sides of the North American continent came to be intimately and importantly involved with giving Egyptian archaeology a firm basis in the United States.

Sara Yorke was born of American parents in Paris on February 19, 1847 and spent the first fifteen years of her life there. Her father, Edward Yorke, was a plantation owner in Louisiana and also a banker. It was in Paris, among the collections of the Louvre most probably, that Sara (named for her mother Sarah Hanna) developed at a young age her life-long interest in ancient Egypt. In 1862 her family settled in Mexico, where she lived for five years. The Yorkes then moved to the United States, settling in Vermont. However, Sara, when she reached the age of 21, went to Philadelphia to live with some aged relatives of her father. It was in that city that she met and married (in 1870) Cornelius Stevenson, with whom she had one son. Mr. Stevenson was a successful

Philadelphia attorney, and the couple had an active social life in Philadelphia among people of means. Sara “became deeply involved with the city’s civic, philanthropic, cultural and educational affairs until the end of her life.

During the late 1880’s, Dr. Pepper and Dr. Charles C. Harrison, Chairman of the University of Pennsylvania’s Ways and Means Committee “conceived the idea of drawing wealthy and prominent Philadelphians who were interested in archaeology, but not particularly in the University, into an association which would tie them and the institution together.”¹ Thus a University Archaeological Association was organized in 1890, forming the basis for the founding of the University Museum.

Probably both because of her obvious abilities, wealth, and her strong interest in ancient Egypt, Sara Yorke Stevenson seemed a natural selection when it came time to appoint the first curator of the Egyptian and Mediterranean Section in 1890, a position in which she excelled. For this responsibility she had two main ambitions: the first was to have an archaeological expedition in Egypt, through the agency of the American Exploration Society, and the second was to develop a comprehensive and impressive gallery of ancient Egypt art. Indeed, the supportive association that this American branch had with the London based Egypt Exploration Fund brought many artifacts from Egyptian excavations to Philadelphia, including important Greek papyri from Grenfell’s excavations in the Fayum.² The two goals of having a Pennsylvania expedition and to develop an adequate museum were intimately connected. In 1892, having been elected a member of the Board of the Department of Archaeology and Paleontology at the University, Sara Stevenson campaigned hard for a new museum building to be called the “Free Museum of Science and Art.” She was involved in site selection, planning and fund raising, to which she herself contributed generously. However, private funds from

the immediate circle of supporters alone would not be sufficient for the challenge of building a large museum, and the State Legislature of Pennsylvania had to be lobbied for support and much private funding raised. The museum was built in sections and the first was dedicated in December of 1899.

When Mrs. Stevenson went to Egypt in 1898, in the hope of organizing an archaeological expedition, she was faced with dealing with the French Egyptologists and the British consul general, and her early education in France allowed her to communicate and to grasp the social and political situation into which she was plummeted. This “shrewd and vigorous” lady, known for her sense of humor and good-tempered realism, was appalled at the intrigues she witnessed in Cairo. “Politics-science-personal rancor are all mixed up” she wrote.³ Mrs. Stevenson contacted English and American Egyptologists, principally Eduard Naville, James Quibell, and George A. Reisner. She might have hired the last, an American, but Mrs. Hearst had enlisted him for the University of California, and by the time that association ended in 1905, Mrs. Stevenson had resigned from the Museum’s board and her position as Curator.

As a founder and guiding member of the American Exploration Society, Sara Stevenson knew the Society could pay for the removal of colossal statues and major architectural elements standing exposed at such places as the Delta site of Tanis. Because she was willing to pay for their removal to the Cairo Museum, she argued that, in exchange, the Egyptian government might give to the University Museum more or less similar material, thus greatly enhancing the collection in Philadelphia. However, she got nowhere with Victor Loret, the then Director-General of the Antiquities Organization. Meanwhile, she had hired as a consultant and assistant a young Mr. Rosher, who she sent off to excavate with Flinders Petrie with the understanding that artifacts Rosher found

would be sent to Philadelphia. She had already, in 1890, received objects from Petrie's excavation in exchange for the support the American Exploration Society had given him. The new shipment consisted of 42 boxes of materials excavated at Denderah.

Mrs. Stevenson is remembered as a pioneer in the study of a broader Museology and in 1908 instituted a course in the subject at the School of Industrial Art of Philadelphia.⁴ From 1889-1905, Mrs. Stevenson had devoted much of her energy and talent to developing the University Museum as a whole and its Egyptian Section in particular. Her goal, as Egyptologist David P. Silverman has written: "was to build up a collection of *excavated* material, of works of art and objects that would be thoroughly representative of all periods and regions of ancient Egypt. In fact, she ensured a steady flow into the Museum of items which were not only representative, but not infrequently of outstanding historical or aesthetic value."⁵ Mrs. Stevenson maintained good relations with London's Egypt Exploration Society and kept in correspondence with Petrie, from whom the Museum benefited in the allotment of his finds. "By becoming a major sponsor of the Egypt Exploration Fund and, later, of a second organization, the British School of Archaeology in Egypt (founded by Petrie), the University Museum was one of the institutions responsible for a rich documentation of these themes."⁶ This sponsorship was strongest during the years when Sara Yorke Stevenson was Curator. For her enormous efforts on behalf of the establishment of the University's museum, both in service and in funding, she received an honorary degree from the University of Pennsylvania, the first woman so honored.

Her involvement with the profession of Egyptology is also evident in her attendance at International Congresses and she presented a paper at a Congress of Anthropology held in Chicago in 1894. She also lectured, as early as 1894, at the

University of Pennsylvania and at the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, the first woman to do so. At the world's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1892 she served as Vice President of the jury of awards for ethnology. Mrs. Stevenson served as President of the Pennsylvania branch of the Archaeological Institute of America from 1899-1903.

Mrs. Stevenson had become president of the Museum's Board of Managers by 1905, but in that same year resigned all her Museum positions "apparently to express disagreement with the Board's handling of a famous dispute about Hilprecht, Curator of the Babylonian Section."⁷ Thus ended a long and distinguished career, but soon another was embarked upon. Three years later, when dwindling family finances warranted it, Mrs. Stevenson began another career in journalism by becoming literary editor and columnist for the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, writing a popular column under the name of Peggy Shippen. She worked at the newspaper until 1920, but also became a curator in another museum, now known as the Philadelphia Art Museum, and was much involved in the women's suffrage movement as well. Mrs. Stevenson's biographer recalled her "magnetic personality, assured executive ability and indomitable energy."⁸ She was invited to join the prestigious American Philosophical Society and was the first President of the Philadelphia Civic Club, organized for the improvement of her city. During the First World War she was Chairman of the French War Relief Committee of the Emergency Aid of Pennsylvania and for her tireless work in sending physicians and medicines to the French she received the civilian version of the French Government's Legion of Honor medal. When she died on November 14, 1921, Sara Yorke Stevenson was said to be the "best known" and "most distinguished" woman in Philadelphia.⁹

Scholarly Publications by Sara Yorke Stevenson:

“On Certain Symbols used in the Decoration of some Potsherds from Daphnae and Naukratis, now in the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania,”
Proceedings of the Numismatic and antiquarian Society of Philadelphia for 1890-91, 1892.

“The tomb of King Amenhotep,” *Papers on Egyptian Archaeology*, 1892.

“Mr. Petrie’s Discoveries at Tel el-Amarna,” *Science* Vol. 19; Nos. 480-482, 510.

“An Ancient Egyptian Rite Illustrating a Phase of Primitive Thought,”
International Congress of Anthropology, *Memoirs*, Chicago, 1894, 298-311.

“Some Sculptures from Koptos in Philadelphia,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 10 (1895), 347-351.

“The Feather and the Wing in Early Mythology,” *Oriental Studies of the Oriental Club of Philadelphia*, 1894, 202-241.

”On the Remains of Foreigners Discovered in Egypt by Mr. W.M.Flinders Petrie, 1895, now in the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. XXXV.

Egypt and Western Asia in Antiquity by Ferdinand Justi, Morris Jastrow Jr., and Sara Y. Stevenson, Philadelphia, 1905.

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Sara Yorke Stevenson: a tribute from the Civic Club of Philadelphia, 1922.

Dictionary of American Biography, XVII, New York, 1935, 635-6.

David O'Connor and David Silverman, "The University Museum in Egypt, the Past,"

Expedition, Vol. 21, No. 2, Winter, 1979, 4-45.

John R. Abercrombie, "A History of the Acquisition of Papyri and related written material in the University of Pennsylvania Museum, *Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar* 6 (1985), 7-16.

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Third Revised Edition, London, 1995,

Notes:

1. O'Connor and Silverman, *Expedition*.21, no. 2, 33.
2. Abercrombie, *BES* 6, 7.
3. *Op.Cit.*, 5-6
4. *Sara Yorke Stevenson:: a tribute from the Civic Club of Philadelphia, 1922,* 38.
5. *Ibid.*, 15.
6. *Ibid.*, 17

7. *Ibid.*, 19
8. *Dictionary of American Biography XVII*, 635.
9. *Sara Yorke Stevenson: a tribute from the Civic Club*, 43.