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Women of Long Island:
Mary Williamson Averell Harriman;
her daughter, Mary Harriman Rumsey

by Judith Ader Spinzia

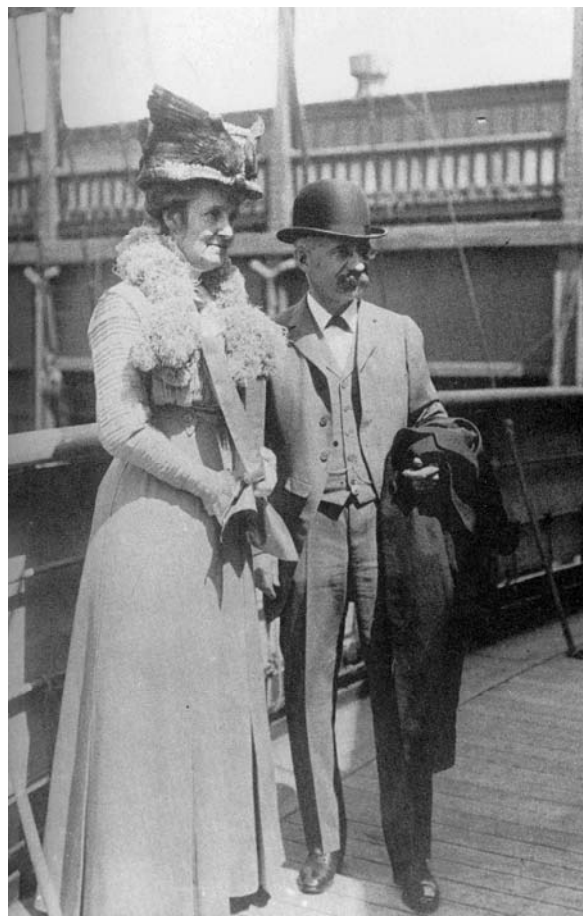
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Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory is a presence we take somewhat for granted today and the study of genetics is not the little experimental corner of biology, still dominated by Gregor Mendel's experiments with garden peas, that it was in the late 1950s when this author chose to pursue a discipline still in its infancy. Far-sighted people of immense dedication studied and researched and exchanged ideas in Cold Spring Harbor under the auspices of the Carnegie Institution of Washington. If the clock is turned back just a bit further, the legacy becomes clearer, controversial, and more fascinating because it is the establishment of the Eugenics Research Office at Cold Spring Harbor, although, in retrospect, based on faulty science, through which a home for the study of inherited human characteristics was created. The philanthropy of Mary Williamson Averell Harriman provided the institution whose presence has enabled us to watch the growth of the science of genetics right here in our midst, a discipline through which we have been brought to knowledge of the human genome.

Mary Williamson Averell Harriman (1851-1932) was the daughter of William J. Averell, a banker from Rochester, NY, and his first wife, Mary Lawrence Williamson. In 1879 she married Edward Henry Harriman (1848-1909) in Ogdensburg, NY, where Mary had spend much of her childhood, since her father was president of the Ogdensburg and Lake Champlain Railroad, and to which she and E. H. would eventually return to build a country home *Arden House*, a sprawling estate on 7,860 acres.¹

E. H. was the son of The Reverend Orlando and Mrs. Cornelia Neilson Harriman, Jr. He was born at St. George's Rectory at the intersection of Peninsula Boulevard and Greenwich Street in Hempstead, Long Island, where his father served as pastor from 1844 to 1849.² Harriman, a self-made man who went to work on Wall Street at the age of fourteen because his father's clerical salary was insufficient

to provide for his further education, had established a one-man brokerage firm and held a seat on the New York Stock Exchange by the age of twenty-two.³ He envisioned a standardized transportation system, national and integrated, and at his death he controlled the Union Pacific Railroad and its subsidiaries and the Southern Pacific Railroad system, encompassing 16,000 miles of main track,



employing 100,000 people.⁴

In the early years of their marriage the Harrimans had resided in an 1885 Queen Anne-style house, designed by Robert W. Gibson, in the Wave Crest Park section of Far Rockaway. Even after E. H.'s death, Mary spent considerable time on the Island, traveling to and from on the family yacht *Sultana* and staying with her daughter Mary, who lived in Brookville, her daughter Carol, who married William Plunket Stewart and resided in East Williston, and her son Averell, who owned residences in Old Westbury and Sands Point.⁵

Mrs. Harriman was a reserved, rather shy woman, who nevertheless was knowledgeable about business and passionate about philanthropy. While Mary, their eldest daughter, managed the affairs of *Arden House* after E. H.'s death in 1909, a responsibility she had assumed before her father's death, Mrs. Harriman alone

E. H. and Mary Williamson Averell Harriman

controlled E. H.'s financial estate.⁶ Mrs. Harriman was determined to make the money work. She was interested in activities and philanthropies that related to people as was her husband, who at the age of twenty-eight had set up the Boys Club of New York. Mrs. Harriman continued to support the Boys Club program and that of the Trudeau Tuberculosis Sanitarium at Saranac Lake, NY, charities close to E. H.'s heart, but she saw many more opportunities to help people and help people help themselves and their nation.⁷

E. H. had not felt that a woman needed a college education but Mary, the eldest of the Harriman's six children, defied him and attended Barnard College, traveling to classes in a horse-drawn carriage and graduating in 1905. She majored in sociology and biology but became so deeply interested in eugenics that she was nicknamed "Eugenia" by classmates.⁸ The idea that the plight of the underclass

in America could be relieved; that the children of this underclass need not perpetuate an underclass; and that, in the end, Americans would contribute more to America and its future, took hold of Mary's imagination. She, as did many, entertained the possibility that the burden of inherited inferior physical and mental characteristics could be excluded from the national gene pool, a radical and controversial concept viewed through our twenty-first-century eyes. Birth control was not enough; education was needed. This was very appealing to Mary, whose work with settlement houses had shown her much that those of her social class knew little about.

Mrs. Harriman became interested in eugenics due to her daughter Mary's enthusiasm. Consequently she accepted the proposal of the American Genetics Association to finance and support Dr. Charles Benedict Davenport's plan to collect data, quaintly referred to as pedigree information, and to apply this under the assumption that phenotypic data would infer genotype.⁹ In 1920 the Eugenics Record Office was established in Cold Spring Harbor. Dr. Davenport collected data among prison inmates, the feeble-minded, and those institutionalized under state care.¹⁰ Essentially it was an attempt to document dominant and recessive human characteristics and to determine how reproduction among the mentally ill would affect future generations and society at large – a better gene pool, a better society.¹¹ During World War I, cooperation came from both New York State and the federal government for research enabling Mrs. Harriman's transfer of the privately funded Eugenics Record Office to the Carnegie Institution of Washington in 1914, an association that continued until 1939.¹²



*original Eugenics Record Office, Cold Spring Harbor, c. 1910 –
the Charles Piers Stewart house*

Mrs. Harriman's philanthropic activities were diverse but she continued to be interested in the mentally ill and was active in work for retarded children through the radically different, progressive treatment approach of Letchworth Village, the New York State institution in Thiells, NY, which

opened in 1912, and from which Dr. Davenport was allowed to collect data for the eugenics project. She invested in training people for public service with a goal of creating efficient government. In 1911 she set up and financially supported the Committee on Public Health, Hospitals and Budget in the New York Academy of Medicine to collect facts related to public health, sanitation, and hygiene and set up public hospitals. She paid the secretarial expenses of the committee until her death. She established the Harriman Research Fund for Medical Research at Roosevelt Hospital and set up the Harriman Research Laboratory in 1912.¹³

Mary Williamson Averell Harriman died at the age of eighty-one on November 7, 1932, two days before the newspapers announced the landslide victory of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the “New Deal” administration that was to set America on the road to recovery after the Great Depression. She would have been pleased to see that her, then widowed, daughter Mary Harriman Rumsey, a dedicated “New Dealer” would become an important part of the recovery through her close association with Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins [Wilson], representing and advocating for the consumer with the title Advisor on Consumer Problems, the only woman other than Secretary Perkins serving on the National Emergency Council.¹⁴

Mary, like her father, didn’t wait around to see what the world might offer, as clearly demonstrated by her drive for an education and, as previously mentioned, her convincing presentation to her mother about the potential of eugenics. On the way home from her debutante ball, surrounded by the bouquets

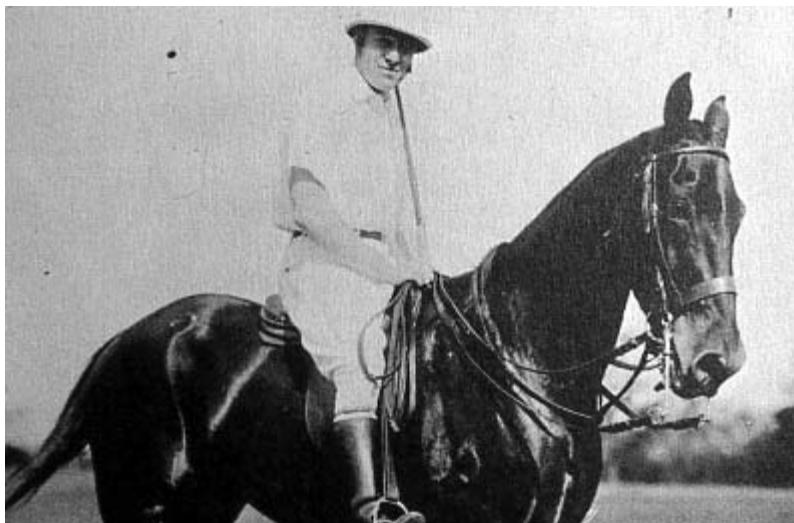


Mary Harriman

of flowers given to her, Mary agonized over the incredible waste and the next morning persuaded several friends to join her in distributing their collected bouquets to those in hospitals. In 1901, nineteen-year-old Mary, with her friend Nathalie Henderson and eight other young women, formed The Junior League for the Promotion of Settlement Movements. They envisioned an inexhaustible supply of young women of their class to whom the league could appeal for volunteers to help in the improvement of social conditions in their city through the Settlement Movement.¹⁵ Later in life, despite the nationwide spread of Junior League chapters, Mary disassociated herself from the organization protesting against its lack of outreach, saying that the League had become “a service club for its members.”¹⁶

Prior to the death of E. H. Harriman, Willard Dickerman Straight had proposed marriage to Mary. Their intention to marry was rejected by her father, who refused to have the young diplomat as a son-in-law.¹⁷ Mary again faced family opposition when she decided to marry Charles Cary Rumsey, Sr. Mrs. Harriman and Mary's brother Averell had been opposed to Mary's marriage to Rumsey because of his reputation for excessive drinking. Mary persevered and she and Charles were married in 1910.¹⁸

Charles Cary Rumsey, Sr. was a 1902 Harvard graduate and talented sculptor from Buffalo, NY, who had been among the artists who had been hired to decorate *Arden House*. He and Mary had met in 1906 at the Meadow Brook Club in the Town of Hempstead [in the area known as East Garden City today] and were instantly attracted to each other because of their love of horses.¹⁹ In 1910, Mary and Pad, as he was known, built their Dutch Colonial Long Island country home on Wheatly Road in Brookville, the activities at which revolved around their mutual love of horses, Pad's passion for polo, and the world of art.²⁰



Charles Cary Rumsey, Sr.

Anxious to remain involved in the farm life she had known at *Arden House*, Mary purchased a farm near Middleburg, VA, in an enclave then known as The Plains, which became a place for family time and a center of cattle breeding where Mary applied her interest in genetics.²¹ Even after Charles' death in 1922, she maintained the Virginia farm while raising her three young children—Charles Cary Rumsey, Jr. was eleven-years-old when his father died, Mary Averell Harriman Rumsey was nine, and Bronson Harriman Rumsey was just five years of age.²²

Mary had continued to maintain a residence on Long Island, living in the Brookville residence until 1929, when she commissioned McKim, Mead, and White to design a French Chateau on Middle Neck Road in Sands Point, next to the home of her brother Averell. An unusual mix of people of varied backgrounds and interests gathered at her Sands Point estate, at her New York City house, and

eventually at the octagon house on O Street in Washington, DC, which she shared with Frances Perkins.²³ The O Street house became a gathering place for social, political, and intellectual friends that included poets, economists, journalist, society members of The Junior League as well as those who rode-to-the-hounds and those polo friends with whom her late husband had socialized.

The writings of George Russell, the Irish mystic, poet and social reformer known as Æ, greatly influenced Mary's own philosophy. She stated that her intense belief in the agricultural cooperative, to which she was dedicated, and in the general concept that community action could meet national challenges was greatly affected by Russell's *The National Being*, written in 1916.²⁴

In 1929, at the very beginning of one of America's most difficult periods, Mary had become involved in the work of New York City's Emergency Exchange Association, a Depression-era barter system.²⁵ She helped to organize the Eastern Livestock Cooperative Marketing Association.²⁶ In 1933 she organized the Farm Foundation Board.²⁷

These were stimulating years but in 1932, just prior to her mother's death, financial reversals in the Southern newspaper chain that she owned caused Mary's financial situation to become tenuous. Without the help of her mother and brother she would have been forced to sell the Sands Point estate and her husband's studio to raise cash.²⁸ In part to get her financial situation on a stronger footing, her brother Averell proposed an investment proposition through which Mary and he, together with William Vincent Astor, Long Island neighbors all, became business partners in a news magazine called *Today*, which merged with *News-Week* to become *Newsweek*.²⁹

In June 1933, based in large part upon her organizational skills, President Roosevelt appointed Mary to the chairmanship of the Consumers' Advisory Board of the National Recovery Administration, a board compiled mostly of academic economists and clubwomen, which tried to establish a code of fair practices. She organized two hundred county councils to provide aid to homemakers in a "grass roots" drive to prevent price gouging thus stimulating recovery, in part, via the watchfulness and decisions of American families.³⁰



*Mary Harriman Rumsey
at her desk in Washington, DC, just prior to her death*

Mary's work with the national recovery was tragically truncated by her death which resulted from complications after a fall from her horse at her Middleburg, VA, farm on her fifty-third birthday in 1934. One wonders how much more we might know about this exuberant and talented woman if her papers, stored in a Brooklyn warehouse, had not been destroyed to make more room those of her brother Averell.³⁰

ENDNOTES

1. George Wheeler, *Pierpont Morgan and Friends. The Anatomy of a Myth* (Englewood, NY: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 153.
The estate would, by 1905, comprise some 20,000 acres in both Orange and Rockland Counties.
2. Rudy Abramson, *Spanning the Century: The Life of W. Averell Harriman* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1992), p. 28.
3. Abramson, pp. 31-34.
4. Persia Crawford Campbell, *Mary Williamson Harriman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 5; *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: James T. White & Co., 1917)14:196-99; and Richard O'Connor, *Gould's Millions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1962), p. 298.

5. Campbell, p. 79, and Raymond E. and Judith A. Spinzia, *Long Island's Prominent North Shore Families: Their Estates and Their Country Homes* (College Station, TX: VirtualBookworm, 2006) vol. I, pp. 350-53, and vol. II, p. 695.

6. Abramson, p. 95.

In Mrs. Harriman's obituary the estate left to her by her husband was valued at approximately \$100 million. *The New York Times* Nov. 8, 1932, p. 21.

7. *Notable American Women 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, volume II G-O (Cambridge, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 141.

8. *The New York Times*, Dec. 19, 1934, pp. 1, 20.

9. Dr. Charles Benedict Davenport, Sr. (1866-1944) served as director of The Biological Laboratory of The Institute of Arts and Sciences, and the subsequent Station for Experimental Evolution, founded in 1904 under the auspices of Carnegie Institution of Washington, Cold Spring Harbor, (now, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory) for thirty years. He authored several books including a textbook entitled *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* in 1911, which was hurriedly written and in which hypotheses were represented as conclusions putting him in the indefensible position of "conclusions-before-evidence." *Naval Officers*



"Davenport House," 2004

Their Heredity and Development (1919) sought to apply his theories to the selection of naval officers during peace time and *Race Crossing in Jamaica* (1929) was a treatise on interbreeding between white and black populations. Dr. Davenport co-authored, with his wife Gertrude Crotty Davenport, also a scientist and educator, *Introduction to Zoology*, *Heredity of Eye Color in Man*, *Heredity of Hair Form in Man*, and *Heredity of Hair Color in Man*. He was co-editor of both *The Journal of Experimental Zoology* and *Psyche* and held editorial positions at two German journals, both of which had been founded in 1935. The Davenports lived in the 1884 Victorian house built by Frederic Mather on the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory campus, on the site of a house built by John Divine Jones which had been destroyed by fire in 1861. The present house is still known as the "Davenport House."

The distinction between the expression of characteristics and gene sequences was ignored by Davenport and the eugenicists although there was clear evidence at the time that the instructions of the genes might or might not be expressed. Researchers were aware of the apparent distinction between the gene heredity of an organism and the expression of that heredity, the phenotype, and a proposal relevant to that distinction and its implications had been published in 1911 by Wilhelm Johannsen. Dr. Davenport's research was doomed from the start because he chose to recognize neither the potential for modification of the gene instructions nor the influence environmental factors might have on gene expression. Dr. Davenport and his associates were clearly on the wrong track.

10. Campbell, p. 42.

11. The philosophy and quasi-scientific theories of the eugenicists was seriously questioned after World War II with the revelations of the racial purity experiments of the Nazis.

12. Elizabeth L. Watson, *Houses for Science: A Pictorial History of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory* (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 1991), pp. 73-76.

13. Campbell, pp. 21-22, 35-36, 38, 43-45.

14. Although the Harrimans were long-time Republicans, Mary had become a member of the Democratic Party and convinced her brother Averell to follow her in support of the presidential candidacy of Al Smith in 1928, with whom she had served as joint chair of the Citizens Summer Playground Committee. Smith had also impressed Mary through his crusade against unsafe workplaces and for corrective legislation after Manhattan's Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911. *The New York Times* Dec 19, 1934, p. 20.

See also Christopher Ogden, *Life of the Party: The Biography of Pamela Digby Hayward Harriman* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1994), pp. 113, 350.

Pamela Digby was William Averell Harriman's third wife. They were married in 1971 and were married at the time of Averell's death in 1986. Spinzia, *Long Island's Prominent North Shore Families* . . . vol. I, pp. 350-53.

15. Cleveland Amory, *Who Killed Society?* (New York: Harper Brother Publishers, 1960), p. 219; Jacqueline Thompson, *The Very Rich Book* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1981), p. 197; and Stephen Birmingham, *America's Secret Aristocracy* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1987), pp. 233-35.

In 1903 Mary Harriman's friend Eleanor Roosevelt joined the New York Junior League. It was the future First Lady's first entry into public life when she became involved in settlement work in New York City. www.nyjl.org/ny

16. *The Washington Post*, Feb. 6, 1934, p. 13.

17. *The New York Times* July 30, 1911, p. SM5.

See also Spinzia, *Long Island's Prominent North Shore Families* . . . vol. II, p. 764.

In 1911 Willard Dickerman Straight married Dorothy Payne Whitney. The Straights' son Michael was the subject of an article, "Michael Straight and the Cambridge Spy Ring" by Raymond E. Spinzia published in The Oyster Bay Historical Society's *The Freeholder* in the Winter 2001 issue.

18. Abramson, p. 96.

19. *The New York Times* May 5, 1910, p. 1, and *The New York Times* Dec. 19, 1934, p. 1.

Her obituary in *The New York Times* also references her excellent horsemanship. She enjoyed fox hunting and was known as an excellent whip in the days of the Ladies Coaching Club for her four-horse-coaching skills.

20. Spinzia, *Long Island's Prominent North Shore Families* . . . vol. II, p. 695.

Charles Rumsey's commissions included the hunt frieze on the Manhattan Bridge and the bronze statue of a bull, originally named "*Taureau*," which is located on Route 25A in Smithtown and which sat in front of the Brooklyn Museum for years before finally being installed in Smithtown. Raymond Edward Spinzia, Judith Ader Spinzia, and Kathryn Spinzia Rayne, *Long Island: A Guide to New York's Suffolk and Nassau Counties* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2009, third edition – revised), p. 172. Of a more personal family nature, he created the fountain at *Arden House* and a memorial to E. H. Harriman at Goshen, NY, "in recognition of Harriman's services as a breeder of blooded horses and a builder of good roads." Rumsey created a statue of Francisco Pizarro in his Paris Studio for the San

Francisco Exposition. After the exposition it was cast in bronze in the United States with the expectation that it would be erected in Trujillo, Spain, Pizarro's birthplace. *The New York Times*, April 15, 1925. The 22-foot-high bronze statue of Francisco Pizarro was given to the Peruvian government by Mary Harriman Rumsey. It stands in front of the Government Palace in the Plaza de Armas in Lima, Peru. Rumsey was expert at equestrian figures and created "The Friar" with W. A. Wadsworth astride; statues of "Hamburg" and "Burgomaster" for Harry Payne Whitney of Old Westbury; "Good and Plenty" for Thomas Hitchcock, Jr., who had bought W. Averell Harriman's Sands Point home; "Rock Sand" for August Belmont III of Bay Shore; and "Nancy Hanks" for John E. Madden. "The Centaur" and "Le Dernier Indian" are exquisite examples of the fusion of his equestrian sculpturing talents with his interpretation of the human form. His work "The Pagan," a nude female figure, initially criticized for its literally interpreted animalistic characteristics, has received somewhat kinder criticism as the years have passed.

21. Abramson, p. 245, and Edward T. James, editor, *Notable American Women 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, volume II P-Z (Cambridge, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 208.

Arden House was actually transferred by Mary Williamson Harriman to her son William Averell Harriman in 1916. Edward T. James, editor, *Notable American Women 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, volume II G-O, p. 142.

22. In September 1922 Charles Rumsey was killed at the intersection of Jericho Turnpike and Tulip Avenue in Floral Park when the convertible automobile in which he was a passenger over-turned. He was traveling home from polo practice with friends to join his wife Mary who was returning there after attending the marriage of Katherine Mackay to Kenneth O'Brien in St. Mary's Church in Roslyn. *The New York Times* September 22, 1922, pp. 1, 2. See also Raymond E. and Judith A. Spinzia, *Long Island's Prominent North Families in the Town of Southampton: Their Estates and Their Country Homes* (College Station, TX: VirtualBookworm, 2010) – O'Brien entry.

Bronson Harriman Rumsey died at the age of twenty-two in an airplane crash near Guadalupe Victoria, Puebla, Mexico. The plane was piloted by Daniel S. Roosevelt, who also was killed. *The Los Angeles Times* April 19, 1939, p. 1, and *The New York Times* April 19, 1939, p. 1.

Daniel S. Roosevelt was the son of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's brother Gracie Hall Roosevelt and grandson of Elliott Roosevelt, Sr., President Theodore Roosevelt's brother. For a discussion of the life of Elliott Roosevelt, Sr., see Raymond E. Spinzia, "Elliott Roosevelt, Sr. – A Spiral into Darkness; The Influences." *The Freeholder*, 12 (Fall 2007):3-7, 15-17.

23. Frances Perkins had resided for several months in a guest house at the Rumsey's Long Island estate when she and Mary were involved in volunteer work in New York City. After the election of FDR, both women relocated to Washington, DC, where Frances lived in a suite of rooms in a wing of the Washington house owned by Mary. After the stress of the week's work they frequently traveled to Long Island to spend weekends together at Mary's estate. Kirstin Downey, *The Woman Behind the New Deal: The Life of Frances Perkins, FDR's Secretary of Labor and His Moral Conscience* (Random House, Inc., 2009), pp. 162, 166.

24. *The New York Times* Dec. 19, 1934, pp. 1 *et seq.*, and *The New York Times* Aug. 6, 1933, p. SM5. In the August 1933 interview with S. J. Woolf, "Champion of the Consumer Speaks Out." Mary Harriman Rumsey discussed the influence *The National Being* had on her social philosophy and direction.

25. *Notable American Women 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, volume II P-Z, p. 209.

26. Abramson, pp. 245-47.

27. www.farmfoundation.org

28. Abramson, p. 247.

29. John N. Gates, *The Astor Family* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc. 1981), pp. 295-96. Astor bought out Mary's share after her death, increasing his share in the magazine to seventy-five percent.

30. *Notable American Women 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, volume II P-Z, p. 208; *The Washington Post* May 15, 1934, p. 12; and *The New York Times* Dec. 19, 1934, p. 1.

31. Abramson, p. 8. Both Mary Harriman Rumsey's papers and those of Katharine (Kitty") Lanier Lawrence Harriman, Averell's first wife, were originally stored in a former Brooklyn bank which had been converted into a warehouse by Averell. They were discarded to provide additional storage space for Averell's papers. A warehouse fire apparently destroyed surviving correspondence. Downey, p. 167.

One of the most beautiful memorials to Mrs. Rumsey is the Mary Harriman Rumsey Playground at the site of the old Casino in Central Park. It was created and named for Mrs. Rumsey by then Parks Commissioner Robert Moses in 1935. Mary Harriman Rumsey was responsible for the creation of approximately five hundred parks in New York City.

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