

Frances Peters

IN CELEBRATION OF OUR
FOUNDER'S BIRTHDAY

Presentation created and narrated by Catherine C. Crane, Past President of The City Gardens Club of New York City (2015-2018), based on research by Jean Ballard Terepka, Archivist of St. Michael's Church, with contributions by Madelaine Piel, City Gardens Club member, and her colleague, Aaron Goodwin. This presentation was given to the CGC membership on March 11, 2021 on the anniversary of Frances Peters's 159th birthday.

Welcome to Frances Peters's Birthday Party

Here is Frances Peters. (A good-looking woman, I think.)

Frances
Peters

Born in 1862, died in 1924



What is happening in Frances's lifetime?

1870 -1900 - The "Gilded Age"



Carnegie Mansion

1870—1900. “The Gilded Age”

Post - Civil War, it was a time of rapid Industrialization
Many fortunes were made, (and this was before income taxes).
Think of Carnegie, Vanderbilt, and Rockefeller.



Squalor on the Lower East Side

Also, it was a time of enormous immigration. To Europeans suffering from crop failures, famine, religious and political persecution, the US was the “Land of opportunity and freedom.” Europeans came to New York in droves. Many ended up settling on the Lower East Side, living in crowded and squalid conditions. I’m told there were 600 people per acre. (I believe I count six children sharing the bed. In the picture above right.)

The income disparity of the time was intense!



Suffragettes Marching

1900 - 1916 - The Progressive Era

From 1900- 1916— In the time that followed, known to many as the Progressive Era, many—especially women— strove to ameliorate the deplorable conditions of the immigrants. One woman invented Public health nursing to address the desperate need. For example, the crowding and unclean conditions resulted in high infant mortality rates.

Many other social welfare programs were initiated to serve the poor, to provide educational opportunities, school lunches and end child labor. Women were also trying to empower themselves fighting for women’s right to vote.

What was the culture of Frances's family?

- Wealth and Social Influence
- "The Social Gospel"
- Love of Nature

Wealth and Social Influence

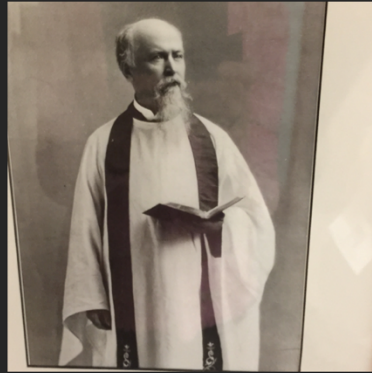
St. Michael's Church



Not only was Frances's family listed in the Social Register, but her grandfather, great uncle, father and older brother were all Rector's of St. Michael's Church (at 99th Street and Amsterdam Avenue), influencing the thinking of their parishioners for exactly a century!

4 Rectors:
Her Father, left
Her Brother, right

Frances Peters's family led the church for 100 years including her grandfather, great uncle, father, and older brother.



Belief in the “Social Gospel”

This teaching was based on Jesus’s words, which went something like this: “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do unto me.” So, members of the church felt a responsibility to care for the needy. They were committed to the well-being of ALL New Yorkers and believed that their wealth should be used for public good.

The Episcopal Church’s ideals of mission and service were embodied by the Peters family. Frances’s father founded Sheltering Arms Children’s Services in the family home—a charity that was important locally into the 20th century.

Frances was the 8th child of 14! As adults, she and her five sisters were extremely active in initiating programs of public good. They lived together and none ever married. They were leaders in the Women’s City Club, the nursing association, the shut-in society, meals on wheels, and, of course, the Woman’s Suffrage Movement. Can you imagine the idea exchange and networking opportunities that happened over their dinner table?

Love of Nature

Pictures of the Gardens at St. Michael's



The family shared a strong **LOVE OF NATURE**. They had properties in Maine and New Jersey and traveled to gardens all over Europe, eager to observe how people interacted with the land. Pictured are the charming gardens along the pathway to the Rectory of St, Michael's Church.

Frances and her Rector brother lobbied the NYC Council and New York State Legislature in favor of the development of Manhattan City Parks and the prevention of a proposed above-ground railroad on Amsterdam Avenue (that would have gone by their church).

Frances's Achievements

- A chess champion



Frances played in city-wide and regional tournaments successfully. In 1902 (age 40) she was named to the Board of Directors of the Woman's Chess Club of NY. In 1910, she had become the Chess Club's VP. Success in this field takes **strategic thinking**.

Leader of the NY State Woman Suffrage Party

Frances and her five sisters were involved in many social and civic causes including:

Social work, welfare agencies, hospitals, parks and universal suffrage.



Woman's Suffrage. By 1915, Frances was a leader of the Woman's Suffrage Party, and had honed **her public speaking skills**. One newspaper reported that she "gave an instructive and brilliant talk on the history and progress of suffrage" at a public meeting. She was urged to run for Vice-Leader of the Borough of Manhattan but had to decline because of her other commitments.

Frances was a role model for her sisters. Below is a newspaper clipping of Frances's youngest sister, Sally, (second from the right) being instructed on how to mark a ballot.





Active in the development, design and preservation of Riverside Park

Riverside Park: Frances Peters was active in the development, design and preservation of Riverside Park. In 1916, Peters was elected Corresponding Secretary of the newly formed Women's League for the Protection of Riverside Park, later becoming its Vice President. Its difficult goal was to prevent Riverside Park from becoming an exposed train yard and transportation hub instead of a place of thoughtful plantings and a tree-lined respite for women, children and families to gather. Frances's organization succeeded in its objective—which we enjoy to this day. Her work here reveals her **Vision, Writing and PR skills**. She was able to envision an outcome and to influence others to help make her vision into a reality.

Chairman of The City Beautiful Garden Movement

Led The City Gardens Club for the Improvement of Back Yards



The City Beautiful Garden Movement

In 1914 Frances became Chairman of The City Beautiful Garden Movement whose mission was improving the squalid backyards of New York City. Soon after she formed...

City Gardens Club for the Improvement of Back Yards

Understanding that natural beauty is good for the soul, and that greenery freshens the air and that back yards could be play space for children who have none, in 1917 Frances started a campaign to transform unsightly and unsanitary back yards into green oases of peace and pleasure. Aesthetic and public health strategies merged. *The New York Tribune* reported: “deep ethical, hygienic and civic reasons for gardens in cities” were being realized, at last!

(For her first project, she collaborated with a member (Mrs. John A. Dix) of the Women’s Municipal League in re-doing her backyard into a garden at 119 East 79th Street (between Lexington and Park Avenues, pictured here). This is an example of serving real estate value, clean air and uplifting aesthetics all at once.)

Picture of
Frances Peters
with
backyard garden



Founding The City Gardens Club of New York City. Within 18 months of establishing the CGC for the Improvement of Back Yards the club morphed into The CGC of NYC because activities had expanded beyond back yards to include projects in vacant lots and grounds around public institutions.



In 1918 Founded
The City Gardens
Club of
New York City!

There were efforts to reclaim the arid and waste spaces everywhere in the city. The Club took on providing window boxes in public libraries, as shown here.



In 1919 Frances Peters partnered with the Horticultural Society in creating a Flower Show at the Museum of Natural History. The slide of this before and after back yard shows an inspiring transformation exhibited in this show.



The City Garden Club for the Improvement of Back Yards

In the early 1920's Frances involved the CGC in charity activities including a Flower Show for Bellevue Hospital. Frances's passion for delivering public service was certainly enhanced by her networking skills and influential contacts.

An early central part of CGC activities involved the distribution of circulars on the planting of trees in honor of the soldiers of WW I and in memory of those who were lost in the War.

Riverside Park set aside a tree planting area to become a Memorial for these purposes which still exists today. The trees are on the triangular lawn "island" on Riverside Drive, right in front of Riverside church at 121st.

Here is a picture of the site which I took yesterday.



Sadly, Frances died in 1924 at only age 62, but she sure accomplished a lot in her lifetime!

Please join me in raising a glass to toast our founder on her birthday, (It's her 159th.) We are proud to be carrying on the inspiring work that she started.

How do we have all this enlightening information about our Founder?

First, we have to thank Jeannie Terepka, the Archivist of St. Michael's Church at 99th and Amsterdam, where the rectors were Frances's family members for 100 years. She has written a wonderful report on Frances which will be put up on our website after this party. It has many quotes from newspapers of the time which you will enjoy.

Secondly, we need to thank our member Madelaine Piel, who loves to do genealogical research, and her colleague Aaron Goodwin. Both, with a very short lead time, came up with more juicy tidbits about Frances's life and achievements.

I am excited by their revelations. To me Frances had seemed a rather vague and mythical figure. Frances Peters now seems like one vital and amazing human being. Thanks to her energetic pursuit of her vision, and her impressive set of skills, we, today, are part of a successful ongoing mission to make our city a more healthful and happy place.

So, let's also raise a toast to our researchers!

Finally, I'd like to thank Donna Cronin for helping me put together this slide presentation. She is an invaluable asset to The City Gardens Club. Here's to Donna Cronin!